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Muscle power - Denon AVR-2311, p54

WELCOME



If there's one thing we're convinced of, it's that 3D works better if it's bigger. Imagine our joy, then, at seeing Samsung's 65-incher, the biggest 3D LED TV yet – share our thrills on page 46. If you also like your 3D to be ultra-wide, we have the latest version of Philips' unique Cinema 21:9 TV to enjoy – read more on page 50 .

It goes without saying really, but home cinema is all about movies. **We've picked the best Blu-rays and DVDs of 2010 to honour in our annual HCC Movie Awards**, starting on page 24. Will you approve our choices or disagree violently?

Elsewhere, we give you an eye-opening insight into HDMI on page 88, and we have the usual plethora of great kit, including a tasty amp from Denon, Sony's new mid-range projector and a fabulous Blu-ray player from Oppo. There's a whole new year of fantastic home cinema products ahead and already we can't contain our excitement!

Chris Jenkins
The Editor

TEAM HCC

Chris Jenkins: Our ISF-calibrated Editor used to run Future's Tech Laboratories



Mark Craven: *HCC*'s Deputy Editor cut his teeth on the Sub's bench for five years



Anton van Beek: News Ed. Anton began his pro-videophile career over 11 years ago



Jill Lubetkin: *HCC*'s Prod Ed. is new to the mag, but a stalwart figure of the AV department



Kevin Gallucci: Has been invested with the much-coveted white coat of *HCC*'s Tech Labs



John Rook: Art Editor John first worked on *HCC* back in 1999, when TVs were made of wood



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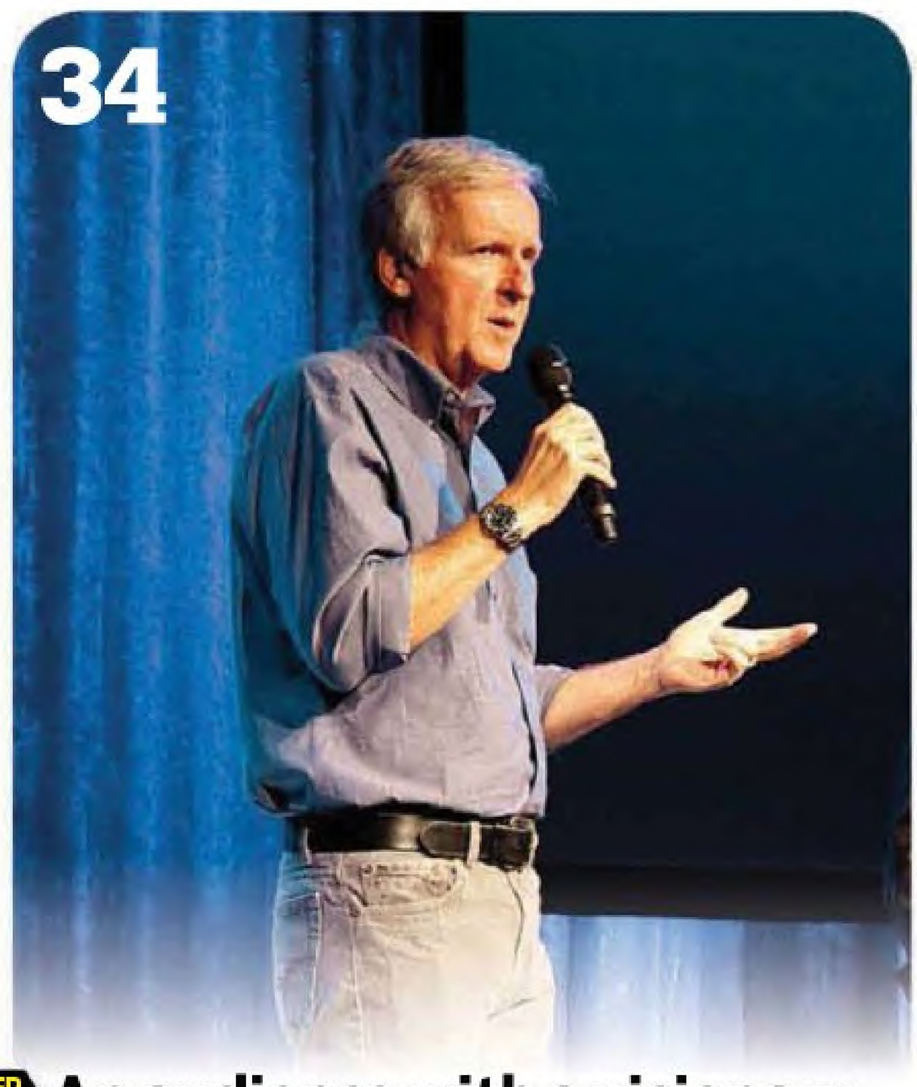
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Pioneering filmmaker James Cameron reveals all about bringing the extended *Avatar* to Blu-ray



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Equipment reviewed in *Home Cinema Choice* is measured and quantified by Future Tech Labs, which for more than 15 years has set the standard for independent AV test & measurement. The findings of the Tech Labs are used to underpin the subjective opinions of our Reviews team, ensuring that you receive the best possible advice when it comes to planning your next purchase

CO-STARRING

This issue's team of expert writers are the best qualified in the business



Adam Rayner: The UK's foremost expert in extreme audio writes about bass, hi-fi and cartoons



Richard Stevenson: Industry veteran and former Editor of UK CE trade journal *ERT*



John Archer: The UK's most experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early *HCC* staffer



Danny Philips: Former editor of *What Video & High-Definition TV* and dedicated AV boffin



Martin Pipe: Technology specialist Martin co-developed *HCC*'s Tech Lab operation



Adrian Justins: Made his name as the editor of *What Video & TV* and *What Home Cinema*

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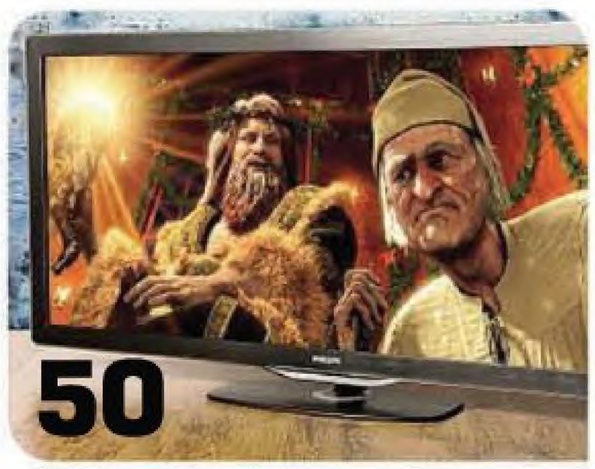
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BULLETIN

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LG thinks small

LG Nano LEX8 → www.lg.com/uk



LG has unveiled the world's first TV with Nano technology. It's not the stuff of science-fiction, but a promise to 'redefine the meaning of clarity in Full LED TVs.' Nano Lighting Technology is used in the new 47in and 55in LEX8 range, with an extremely thin film printed with miniscule dots placed in front of a full array of LEDs to disperse light more evenly and effectively across the screen. The slinky LEX8 TVs also feature localising dimming in both 2D and 3D thanks to Micro Pixel Control and 400Hz processing. They'll launch in the US in 2011.

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Melody Maker

Marantz Melody Movie → www.marantz.co.uk



Marantz's new stylish one-box wonder offers an ideal solution for those who don't have the space for a 5.1 home cinema system or are looking for a quality HD source for a second room. Priced around £800, and the flagship of Marantz's Melody range, the Melody Movie combines a high-quality Blu-ray player (based around tech developed for the brand's £5,000 UD9004) with a 2.1-channel 140W Class D digital amplifier – Dolby Virtual Speaker processing is employed to simulate a full surround sound experience.

Partner with...

Sharp Aquos LED TV
Affordable Full HD
£500-£600 approx



Sharp has expanded its Aquos LED TV range with new 32in and 37in full HD models. The £500 LC-32LE210E and £600 LC-37LE320E have slim 46mm profiles, integrated Freeview tuners, three HDMI inputs, Dolby Digital Plus compatibility, Eco-Picture control and edge LED backlighting. The 37in model also delivers 100Hz picture processing, while the smaller screen features a Sharp Aquos TV first – timeshift recording to a USB 2.0 memory stick.
www.sharp.co.uk

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Jamo's bijou THX



Jamo has come up with a THX-approved home cinema speaker system designed for medium-sized living rooms. The company's new D500 THX Select 2 series offers compact and elegant speakers in the form of the three-way D500 LCR (£300 each) and three-way dipole D500 SUR (£500 per pair), and there's also a couple of systems available coupling three D500 LCRs and two D500 SURs with either the SUB650 or D600 SUB subwoofers, which are priced around £1,700 and £2,300 respectively.
www.bbg.eu.com

Qs call on Blade



Speaker specialist KEF has expanded its Q Series range with a trio of floorstanders. The trio share the same basic configuration of audiophile-grade technology, developed for the Concept Blade loudspeaker project with a new generation Uni-Q MF/HF array paired with a long-throw bass driver of equal size. The difference between the speakers comes from the size of the drivers – 5.25in in the case of the Q500 (£700 per pair), 6.5in in the Q700 (£1,000 per pair) and 8in in the flagship Q900 (£1,200 per pair).
www.kef.com

Fat sound, slim bar



The YSP-2200 is the latest addition to Yamaha's burgeoning range of soundbars. Priced around £800, this super slimline system stands just 79mm tall and boasts three HDMI v1.4a inputs and one output with audio return for 3D support. Features include an integrated 132W digital amplifier, HD audio decoding with 7.1-channel sound processing, 11 cinema DSP programs, a height-adjustable compact subwoofer, IntelliBeam calibration, Music Enhancer functions and UniVolume tech to eliminate surges in volume.
http://uk.yamaha.com

Toshiba's glasses-free 3DTV

Japan's gadget fans first in line to cast off their 3D spectacles

TV buyers have been demanding 3D without glasses ever since the first wave of 3D TVs broke early in 2010 – and now, some of them at least, are soon to have their wish come true.

Toshiba is the first of the big TV makers to ship 3D-without-glasses into the high street though it's a Japanese high street as a UK launch is still 'under consideration'. Its first two GL (Glasses Less) models, which come in 12- and 20-inch screen sizes, arrive in Japanese stores this month.

Most manufacturers have shown only conceptual designs at technology expos, which invariably use bespoke software.

Hideo Kezuka, Toshiba's TV specialist responsible for the ground-breaking product, says the technology has been in development for five years.

'We first demonstrated autostereoscopic 3D back in April 2005, in the form of a 3D flatbed display,' he says. At the time it was predicted that the technology would be used only for games, e-books and even virtual menus in hi-tech restaurants. Creating glasses-free 3D TV brings unique challenges. The new Toshiba sets require serious silicon muscle.



Hideo Kezuka: says Toshiba is already developing big screens for glasses-free TV

The larger model integrates a Cell Broadband Engine with Toshiba's new GL 3D CELL REGZA Engine and newly developed multi-parallax conversion LSIs. Explains Kezuka: 'High speed arithmetic processing creates nine parallax images from the original content and converts it to 3D with real depth.' Ultimately, panel resolution is the key, reveals Kezuka. 'Basically, creating a wide viewing angle and generating multiple parallax results in the loss of effective image resolution.'

The larger of the two GL TVs has a native panel resolution of 8.29 x 1.47 million pixels (much more than a regular Full HD TV), but after picture processing, the resulting 3D image is 720p. The smaller 12in screen offers 3D images with a resolution of 466 x 350 pixels.

Kezuka says Toshiba has already started development on larger screens. 'We demonstrated a 56in prototype at CEATEC.' The company is keeping schtum about licensing deals, but is committed to the concept. 'What the company is now aiming to realise is an "impression touched by reality,"' says Kezuka. 'Enjoying 3DTV without wearing glasses is the ideal way of pursuing that.'



Stands and delivers 3D: Coming soon to... Japan

Playlist...

Team *HCC* reveals its Playback picks of the last month

Fringe: Season One (All-region BD)



JJ Abrams' gory inter-dimensional conspiracy thriller combines *The X-Files*, *Lost* and *Sliders* in one extras-filled package. *CJ*

Predators (Region A/BD)



A welcome return to form for the dreadlocked alien hunters after *AVPR*, and 100 minutes of home cinema fun. *MC*

Grand Designs series 1-9 (seesaw.com)



The first 72 episodes on internet TV are fascinating for watching Kevin's hairline recede. *JL*

Star Wars: The Force Unleashed II (PS3)



Starkiller is back from the grave and out for blood in this sequel. A truly immersive gaming experience. *KG*

Night of the Demon (R2 DVD)



The long-awaited UK DVD release of Jacques Tourneur's brilliant 1957 horror is the only thing that's stopped me wasting my life playing FIFA 11 on my Xbox 360. *AvB*

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Talkback

Team *HCC* reveals its thoughts about the home cinema market



KG: Home cinema in 3D is finally coming of age. We have seen a lot of new content on Blu-ray in the recent months, and there are many more slated for release in 2011. Picture quality has finally caught up as well. The newly adopted THX 3D Display Certification is up and running and displays are already receiving it. Two machines that have already passed THX's rigorous tests are the LG Infinia PX950 plasma and JVC's DLA-X9B flagship 3D projector. THX 3D certification ensures that there is no loss of picture quality and that you are viewing the 3D movie as the filmmakers intended. We'll be covering all the upcoming 3D gear and content in *HCC*.



CJ: What impressed me most about the Optoma 3D-XL demo was its effectiveness with games. While there was nothing wrong with its performance with movies or broadcast, what it brought home to me was how much 3D is likely to appeal to gamers. They're used to the idea of concentrating their attention entirely on the display, and the 3D effect adds something tangible to the experience. Couple it with surround sound and you're onto a whole new and compelling level.

Optoma turns projectors 3D

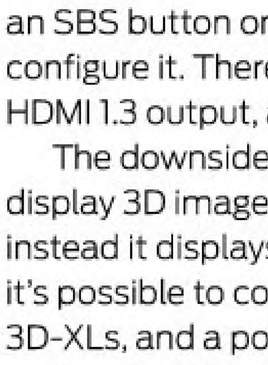
3D-XL adapter adds a dimension to DLP-Link models

Projector specialist Optoma has demonstrated a neat device to turn a conventional video projector into a 3D model. The 3D-XL projector adapter is designed to convert suitable DLP projectors from 2D operation to 3D, and at a cost of £249.99 with one pair of ZD201 active shutter glasses, this may well be cheaper than replacing an existing 2D model with a 3D equivalent.

The *HCC* team saw the 3D-XL in action at an exclusive press launch, and our first impressions were positive, with a steady and effective 3D effect achieved on a number of movies, games and broadcast material including Sky Sports.

There are, though, some limitations to the adapter's performance. It's designed to work with DLP projectors featuring TI's DLP-Link technology, which allows a projector and 3D glasses to sync without an external emitter. The sync signal bounces off the projection screen, which means that if you turn your head away from the screen, the glasses stop operating, and go clear. This may or may not be the desired effect! It also raises questions about acceptable viewing angles, which we'll be testing when review models are available.

Other projector requirements are that it displays a 120Hz frame-sequential 3D source, and must have an HDMI input. The glasses must, of course, be DLP-Link compliant too.



Gavin Farlie: Optoma's product specialist demonstrates the virtues of the 3D-XL adapter



Optoma has 14 suitable projectors in all and lists other suitable models on its website. Extra sets of glasses will be available for around £100.

The 3D-XL connects between your Blu-ray source and projector via HDMI, automatically detecting 3D material and switching the projector to 3D mode. If used with Sky's side-by-side 3D system, there's an SBS button on the side of the 3D-XL to configure it. There are two HDMI 1.4 inputs, one HDMI 1.3 output, and an RS-232 control port.

The downside to the system is that it can't display 3D images with full 1080p resolution; instead it displays at 720p/120 Hz. Theoretically, it's possible to combine two projectors, two 3D-XLs, and a polarising filter to create a 1080p system, but this isn't an idea Optoma is pushing hard, though Optoma's product manager Gavin Farlie said that it might be a cost-effective option for some applications depending on the size of the audience and the number of glasses required.

Our final verdict on the Optoma 3D-XL will have to wait until we get our hands on a review sample – the UK launch is scheduled for January 2011. More from Optoma at www.optoma.eu.



First contact: An HDMI socket is essential

Hole of the room



Entertainment One has announced that it will be unleashing Joe Dante's family-friendly chiller *The Hole* on DVD and Blu-ray in the UK on January 17. The film follows two brothers who discover a bottomless pit in the basement of their new house and subsequently find that their darkest fears are coming to life. Both the DVD and Blu-ray will also feature a *Making of...* documentary, interviews with the cast and crew, and behind-the-scenes footage. It's just a shame that there are currently no plans for a Full HD 3D Blu-ray release of this entertaining flick.
www.entertainmentone.co.uk

Grains of Sandler



Adam Sandler is bringing a heavyweight comedy cast to DVD and Blu-ray on January 17 with the UK release of his latest hit, *Grown Ups*. The film finds Sandler joined by Kevin James, Chris Rock, David Spader and Rob Schneider as five high school friends who reunite after 30 years and try to wrestle with the challenges of adulthood. Extras on the DVD are limited to a pair of featurettes; while the Blu-ray adds a commentary, MovieIQ, gag reel and five additional featurettes, including the intriguingly titled *Busey and the Monkey*.
www.sonypictures.co.uk

The girl who hacks



Fans of Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy can look forward to the UK DVD and Blu-ray of the second film adaptation, *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, on 10 January. This time, hacker Lisbeth Salander and journalist Mikael Blomkvist become embroiled in an attempt to expose the world of sex trafficking. Extras confirmed for both releases include cast and crew interviews, a look at the making of a fight scene, trailers, and a sneak peak at the final film, *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*.
www.momentumpictures.co.uk

Bad to the bone



Arthouse film favourite Artificial Eye has revealed that it will be bringing the award-winning thriller *Winter's Bone* to DVD and Blu-ray in the UK on 31 January. Based on Daniel Woodrell's best-selling novel of the same name, this chilling adaptation stars Jennifer Lawrence (soon to be seen in *X-Men: First Class*) as a girl investigating the sins of her father's past in a bid to loosen his grip on their family. Both versions will include a *Making of...* featurette, deleted scenes, an alternate opening, the theatrical trailer and a music video.
www.artificial-eye.com

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Got a bite!

Piranha 3D → Entertainment in Video
R2 DVD & Region B BD

Haven't made the jump to 3DTV yet? Well, maybe this lovely lady will make you change your mind. The bikini-clad Riley Steele stars alongside such acting luminaries as Elisabeth Shue, Ving Rhames, Christopher Lloyd, Richard Dreyfuss and Kelly Brook in director Alexandre Aja's schlock-horror about a lakeside resort invaded by millions of prehistoric man-eating fish. Making its UK Blu-ray debut on December 27, the two-disc *Piranha 3D* set features both full HD and anaglyph 3D versions of the film, plus a commentary, *Making of...* doc and a selection of deleted scenes.

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Premiere

HCC's guide to what's happening in the world of TV and films...

Double D to bust out

Despite a poor performance at the box office, *Piranha 3D* will have a sequel in summer 2012. The wittily-entitled *Piranha 3DD* will be written by the guys behind the last three *Saw* films and directed by John '*Feast*' Gulager. More importantly, the plan this time is to shoot it all in 3D!



The Dead live on...

US TV network AMC hit it big with its 6-part zombie epic *The Walking Dead*, adapted from the acclaimed B&W comic book series by Robert Kirkman. It was such a huge success that a second series was greenlit after only two episodes. So get ready for even more undead action next Halloween.

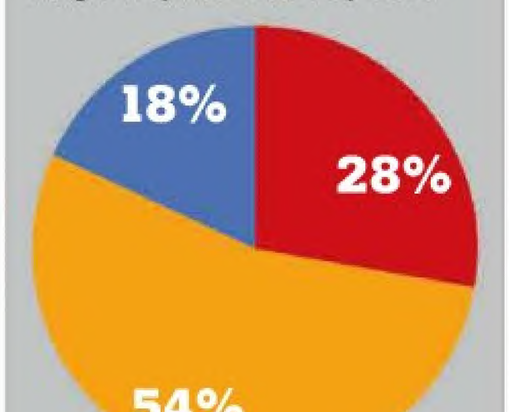
Bits and pieces

With his *RoboCop* remake still trapped in development hell, Darren Aronofsky has confirmed he'll be directing the next Wolverine film, smartly called *The Wolverine*. The filmmaker claims that the story, rumoured to take place in Japan, will be a 'one-off' and 'isn't a sequel'.

We asked...

Do you care about 'eco' features on your AV kit?

- Yes, think of the polar bears!
- Not really – it wouldn't influence a purchase
- Nah – the world can burn as long as my kit is the very best!



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action

BBC continues with 3D trials

iPlayer could be used to deliver next-generation content

The special 3D *Strictly Come Dancing* clip, which ran in UK cinemas as part of November's Children in Need campaign, is just part of the BBC's 3D trial strategy that will see more one-off productions in the coming year – but no dedicated channel.

When *HCC* attended the filming of the *Strictly*... footage at BBC Television Centre, we quizzed Danielle Nagler, head of HD at the Beeb, about the corporation's plans for 3D – only a few days after Sky's 3D channel went live.

'We are not considering a 3D channel,' she stated, before outlining the BBC's current view on 3D. 'Our view on 3D is that it's exciting, but we're not yet sure how it will play out. *Strictly*... is a chance for us to test out our creativity, and work out whether 3D can help us to tell stories.'

The BBC has adopted a 'strategic, cautious approach' to 3D, revealed Nagler. 'We will continue making programmes to explore 3D. No more than five projects a year, all linked to 2D content, all different.'



BBC: 'Strategic, cautious approach' to 3D

Free 3D for feepayers

Of course, the BBC has to tread carefully. With only a handful of licence fee-payers able to watch 3D at home, it can't be seen to spend public money on content with a limited audience. With that in mind, Nagler stressed that funding for the *Strictly*... sequence came from the commercial arm, BBC Worldwide. Nagler added, 'We have a responsibility to look at new technology that comes along and a duty to try it out.'



You can leave your shirt on, Gav

That 'new' is interesting, as Nagler admits the BBC considered doing *Strictly*... 3D with anaglyph technology last autumn. 'But it was a bad idea. Why would you want to watch the last generation of 3D when the new generation is already here?'

The conversation turned to 3D content delivery. While the *Strictly*... clip was shot with 3D cinemas, surely BBC's iPlayer could be called into action?

'Not yet,' responded Nagler. 'It is possible to develop iPlayer for 3D, but it would need reconfiguration.'

This could happen with the YouView box launch, although we believe 3D playback is not part of the box spec, the use of which is up to the maker.

So what other 3D content can we expect? Nagler didn't offer names, but said, 'we don't want to make 3D around marginal content. It has to be core content that others aren't necessarily doing, of high quality.'

Top Gear, perhaps?

'We're definitely not planning to make *Top Gear* in 3D.'

Icecrypt adds HD+



We last heard from Icecrypt earlier this year when the UK brand picked up a *HCC* Best Buy for its debut Freeview HD receiver, the Icecrypt T2200. Now it's set to impress us again with its first step into the world of Freeview+ HD recorders, the T2400. Available in 500MB, 1TB and 2TB HDD sizes (with prices starting at around £300 for the smallest version), this smart set-top box features recommended viewing, USB back-up for recordings, Dolby Digital Plus decoding and even playback of DivX-encoded AVI and DivXHD-encoded MKV files.
www.icecrypt.com

Imerge still lives!



Earlier this year, it came as both a disappointment and a shock to learn that Cambridge-based home media server pioneer Imerge was to close its doors for the final time. The company was behind the online music operation XiVaStore and the award-winning MS1-HD media server. The good news though is that the Prism Sound group has stepped in and bought various Imerge assets and the brand will 'continue with current production as well as new product development'. Customer support for Imerge and its OEM partners is also set to continue.
www.prismsound.com

Power of touch



If you're looking into building a serious cinema room, you might consider Crestron's latest 4in widescreen touchpanel, the £1,050 TPMC-4SMD. Available in gloss black or white, the device delivers control, video, intercom and power over a single high-speed Ethernet connection. This allows the user more flexible installation options by eliminating the need for a local power supply or for dedicated power wiring. Other features include streaming video, 2-way IP intercom, an LED-backlit button, and even the inclusion of a built-in proximity sensor!
www.crestron.com

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This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



News x10

1 Ultra 3D tease

Samsung has given AV fans a glimpse of the future with a sneak peak at its prototype 70in Ultra Definition 240Hz 3DTV, so called as it refers to a screen resolution of 3,840 x 2,160, which led to the company having to develop new super high-speed silicon to drive all of those pixels. Now, if only there was actually some content to watch on it.

2 Big screen OLED

News has also emerged from a Korean news service that Samsung is planning to start a limited production run of 4,000 55in OLED displays for release in 2012. The report indicates that Samsung will be using 8th generation glass substrates and existing LCD production tech in the production of the screens. Here's hoping they're a success and that the range eventually goes worldwide.

3 Ditch the dish

Are satellite dishes *passé*? Dutch PhD graduate, Marcel van de Burgwal, thinks they may be. For his doctoral thesis he designed an advanced microchip that could allow flat antennae to receive satellite signals, without any need for aiming. The chip is so small it could even be fitted into tablets, phones and other handheld devices.

4 Warners chase apps

Warner Brothers subsidiary Global Digital Media Exchange Inc has entered a licensing agreement with Jargon Technologies to provide advanced interactive BD-J application software. 'Jargon has created a technology that will allow our team to author innovative projects for our wide variety of customers. We will be able to do this more efficiently and at a lower cost than ever before,' claims GDMX honcho, Zeevik Bar-Am.

5 New year honour

The National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences has revealed that Panasonic, Philips, Sony and TDK will all be honoured with the 62nd annual Technology & Engineering Emmy Award during the 2011 Consumer Electronics Show (CES). The technology giants are being honoured for the joint development of blue laser optical systems that led to today's Blu-ray technology.

6 iPlayer for BTVision

BTVision users will finally be able to access a full version of BBC iPlayer through their set-top boxes in the coming months. BT and the BBC are jointly launching the service via automatic updates over the next five months, with the plan that all BTVision owners will have access by April 2012.

7 Arizona raising...

Holographic TV has edged closer to reality following news that researchers from the University of Arizona have developed the fastest 3D motion hologram ever. The *Star Wars*-like tech is currently at the stage where it refreshes every two seconds, but the researchers claim that these rates will be good enough to develop 3D holographic TVs for the consumer market within the next 7-10 years.

8 PS3 loves LOVEFiLM

LOVEFiLM's attempts to assert its dominance in the movie-streaming market have taken another major step forward, thanks to a recent agreement with Sony that gives PS3 users access to the service. This follows other deals that have seen the company's movie-streaming apps appear on Sony and Samsung web-connected TVs.

9 BD sales rise

Blu-ray disc sales are on the up in Europe according the latest figures from the Digital Entertainment Group Europe. BD disc sales across the region have doubled year-on-year, more than making up for the slight dip DVD software sales have suffered from over the same period.

10 Philips makes speedy exit

Despite its popularity with pro installers, Philips has announced that it is ending production of its Pronto controller range, after failing to find a business partner in Asia, with whom the company could relocate some of its existing remote control activities.



Web chat

It's Blu-ray vs DVD on the *HCC* website...



Offended by BD

'The only Blu-ray disc I've seen was *Quantum of Solace* and it was rubbish. I'm far happier with the better quality of DVD. The BD disc went from exceptional to rubbish. When I saw it again in DVD quality nothing jumped out and wound me up so I could just watch the film.'

Subjective viewing

'The best Blu-rays offer a substantial improvement to DVD. Exactly which films offer the best gains is more contentious and subjective when viewing side by side. Sometimes I think Blu-ray looks terrific and sometimes I think it looks artificial and that DVD more closely represents the cinema experience.'

Innate quality

'Blu-ray was supposed to give us the original, innate quality of films that stand up to and exceed anything digital offers. One need only point out the superior quality of the original *Star Trek* on Blu-ray compared to the modern DVD series to see that the film source is still more commercially viable. Can we please pursue this fight more effectively and vigorously or we'll face more Ultimate Hunter Editions of our favourite films?'

Screen size

'Having read through the posts it seems to be an issue of screen size. On screens below 40-50 inches it's more difficult for Joe Public to see the difference.'

Blu Bond is best

'Are you really debating the quality of Blu-ray over DVD? On anything over a 26in screen the difference is obvious, and gets more pronounced the larger the screen. To the guy who doesn't see any difference in his Bond movie, the Blu-ray is an excellent encode offering far greater detail, colour, motion, etc over the DVD. God knows what kit he's using or who set it up as the soundtrack is also excellent and the opening car chase is a favourite show reel.'

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POINT OF VIEW

Richard Stevenson calls for more stringent protection of the film industry when it comes to dealing with the individual buccaneers of broadband

While I often wear frilly white shirts, long brocade coats and tricorn hats, I do have strong issues with piracy. No, not the romantic, 'I want to be Johnny Depp and snog Keira Knightley' sort of piracy (on account I am more of your Keef Richards-style pirate...), but the sort that involves illegal filesharing of copyright material. Those issues have become ever more serious at time of writing as the Government's anti-piracy plans have been scuppered by the chase guns of TalkTalk and BT. As sure as chainshot across parliament's mizzenmast, these scallywags have forced a judicial review of the Digital Economy Act.

Okay, I will admit that the Act was a bit of a farce. The outgoing Government shot it through parliament like a rat through the ship's biscuits in July this year, taking some 20 minutes to debate it among the six per cent of the Commons that was sitting that day. An all-encompassing parley on the issue, it was not. The result was **a knee-jerk Act, poorly constructed, full of ambiguity and dotted with holes bigger than a galleon's gunports**. But I liked what it stood for; an official clamp down on the illegal file sharing of music and movies.

If I may be so bold as to stand on the fo'c's'le on this issue; illegal filesharing is theft and does damage the economic model of the film industry, particularly smaller studios. If you want films to be sanitised drivel, filled with flash-in-the-pan *X-Factor* stars (just as the music industry has already become) you carry on illegal filesharing. I won't, and I am 100 per cent behind the work of Andrew Crossley on this matter. Anyway, back to the plot...

TalkTalk and BT objected to the fact that were ultimately held responsible for the sins of their customers to the tune of some very hefty corporate fines. Ambiguous wording in the Act compounded the issue to ensure that there only needed to be 'likelihood' of someone illegally filesharing on their network for punishment to ensue. That is rather like fining the Department for Transport every time someone drives a car that is 'likely' to break the speed limit. The legal challenge to review the Act however was based on conflicts with existing European legislation on e-commerce and, ironically, data protection of the individual pirate in question.

Fifty lashes

Hell's barnacles! This is just the sort of bleeding-hearted, lily-livered legislation that is letting this country, and Europe as a whole, drift into a sea of directionless liberalisation. I would defend the broadband operators in this, but seek out the pirates individually and get out the cat o' nine tails.

So the Digital Economy Act is to be reviewed and probably repealed, no doubt to be replaced by a new bill with even fewer teeth. But the fact is that no bill, legislation or Act of Parliament is going to stop people illegally sharing copyrighted media. Unfortunately, filesharing is neither regarded as morally bad nor a criminal activity by individuals who would not dream of shoplifting a £15 Blu-ray from the shelves of HMV.

The only hope to tackle this individual piracy is probably a combination of high-tech electronic digital rights management and a wholesale change in public attitude.

Ironically, the film industry itself has turned pirates of the high seas from thieves, brigands and murderers into romantic rogues. But history is written. They are, and always will be, the bad guys. Debate on the Digital Economy Act will draw out into months of judicial review and subsequent re-write, and it is a good time to reflect on your personal take on piracy

For more of Richard Stevenson's AV thoughts, check out http://hcc.techradar.com/points_of_view



Richard Stevenson is keen to stress he won't be appearing in panto this year as Blackbeard, tempting though it may be!

ILLUSTRATION: BY TEKURA MAEVA

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TIME MACHINES

Martin Pipe talks about a forgotten cinema sound technology that was a precursor to today's booming immersive blockbusters

Home cinema standards have their roots in scaled down theatrical technology. The Sensurround process was co-developed by Universal Studios and US speaker manufacturer Cerwin-Vega.

Sub-bass was where Sensurround was at, having been designed to stimulate all the senses and not just your hearing. The technology debuted in 1974 with *Earthquake*, and the rest of the decade would become known as 'The Golden Age of Disaster Movies'. Indeed, the studio arguably kick-started the genre with the success of *Airport*.

These large-scale, high-budget releases were a feast for eye and ear, and turned a visit to the cinema into an eagerly anticipated 'event'. The idea behind Sensurround is that cinemagoers would not only see and hear the eponymous earthquake, but actually 'feel' it too! The technology's clever use of 'infra-bass' could be very effective and *Earthquake* won the 1975 'Best Sound' Oscar.

Shoe-horned speakers

Kitting out a cinema with Sensurround was complicated and expensive. Large, horn-loaded, low-frequency speakers were built around 18in Cerwin-Vega drivers and packed into bulky cabinets, which were usually located beneath the screen and in the rear corners of the cinema. Larger auditoria might have required around 20 of these horns, which were so big that sometimes entire rows of sets had to be removed in order to accommodate them. Powering all of this high-octane transducery were multi-kilowatt stacks of amps, built by a Californian company called BGW Systems. But what of the signals that drove it?

The comparatively primitive analogue cinema-audio systems of the early 1970s could not extend down to the 17Hz-120Hz region, over which Sensurround was active. To get around this limitation, control tones buried in the film print were used to activate a bass generator circuit during the relevant parts of the movie. The output of this circuit would be fed to the amplifiers and speakers. This use of control tones ensured that Sensurround would be compatible with the plethora of film prints in use at the time.

However, MCA, with its controlling stake in Universal, re-engineered Sensurround ('Mod II') so that information could be directly carried by the movie soundtracks, negating the need for the 'rumble generator'. Taking advantage of improvements in the quality of optical prints, Mod II also removed the 'Academy curve' (which restricted frequency response), implemented a compander-type noise reduction system (dbx) and even made provision for surround sound.

With a response of 16Hz-16kHz, and a dynamic range approaching 90dB the specs were impressive by the standards of the day. In fact, MCA felt that its Sensurround technology could compete with the recently launched Dolby Stereo. The third outing for the tech was 1977's *Rollercoaster*, with its vibrating seats and white-knuckle ride sequences.

By 1978 there were over 2000 Sensurround-equipped cinemas. But only four Universal movies ever employed it and 20th Century Fox and Warner Bros, meanwhile, developed rival formats. In 1977, the success of the Dolby Stereo-encoded *Star Wars* over *Rollercoaster* demonstrated that Sensurround alone could no longer be guaranteed to draw audiences.

The system was not suitable for use in the emerging multiplexes, as the vibrations would be felt by adjacent moviegoers. But the demise of Sensurround did not dampen the cinema-going public's enthusiasm for better sound, as the success of *Star Wars*, the winner of 1978's 'Best Sound' Oscar, so amply proved

Do you have any fond memories of '70s disaster movies? Let us know: email hcc@futurenet.com



Writer **Martin Pipe** is planning to move to a location in an earthquake zone to compare Sensurround's authenticity. That's dedication

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TECH TANTRUM

While everyone talks about 3D, the real revolution of Internet Connected TV is quietly bubbling under, says a bemused **Barry Fox**

As happens with all new tech trends, Connected TV is a mess of rival and incompatible options, with unfamiliar names and confusion over what does what and how. But give it a year or so and we could well be in a new age where only a few people still go out in the rain to rent a DVD or BD from Blockbuster, or hope Royal Mail will get around to delivering what they ordered by post.

Instead, 'Digital lockers' run by such manufacturers as Samsung, Sony and Panasonic, and retailers such as Tesco, Sainsbury and Best Buy will be competing with Apple to become our one-stop shop for online viewing and downloaded entertainment.

Many new TV sets, set-top-boxes and BD players already have an Ethernet broadband socket. Until recently this has been used mainly for system software updates. But some sets, for instance from Sony, Samsung and Panasonic, can already use an internet connection to access free services like YouTube and BBC iPlayer. Companies like LOVEFiLM are already making a limited number of movies available to watch for a one-off fee or a subscription.

Every locker helps...

It's what happens next that will be the real game-changer. A Digital Locker system will let us pay a friendly-faced company for a movie or TV show, or music recording or computer game, which is then automatically stored in our own personal digital 'cloud', inside a huge computer store run by a faceless giant such as IBM. We will be able to use the stored entertainment on any of our equipment, be it TV, home computer, laptop or smartphone.

Tesco is already planning a Locker scheme called Tesco Connect, which will be linked to the Tesco Clubcard. When a Tesco customer buys a CD or DVD, they will take it home to play in the usual way, but the retailer will automatically store a digital copy of the disc in the customer's Digital Locker. This copy can then be downloaded to a portable player or laptop, or accessed by an Internet TV.

Richard Bron of BluePrint, the company working with Tesco on setting up the scheme talked about it to a Futuresource industry conference earlier this year.

'It's aimed at our average customer, who just knows how to press Open, Close and Play. She buys a digital camera and, when the memory is full, brings it back and asks us to develop the film. So we will start with the sale of a disc, because discs are what customers really understand. People want to buy the title, not the format.'

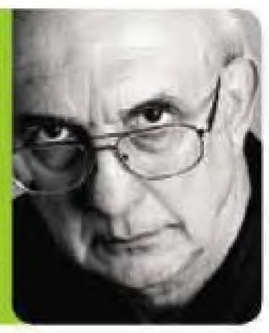
Tesco is only one of many companies hoping for a slice of the new action. They all know they need a common standard so that customers can have just one locker and buy from different sources, using a single payment account.

The standard can't be iTunes because Apple has always refused to licence it. So 60 big hitters including HP, Intel, Panasonic, Microsoft, Best Buy and Sony got together to gang up on Apple as the Digital Entertainment Content Ecosystem.

DECE is now finalising a system called UltraViolet that will enable us to buy entertainment from whomever we like and play it on whatever platform we like, and Tesco has said it wants to use this system.

But the UltraViolet standard is not yet finalised and Apple could scupper the whole DECE plan by offering to licence iTunes for use by the likes of Tesco instead of UltraViolet itself

In how many dimensions are you comfortable viewing the world? Let us know: email hcc@futurenet.com



Never one to be behind the times in terms of technology, **Barry Fox** has had his head in the cloud for years

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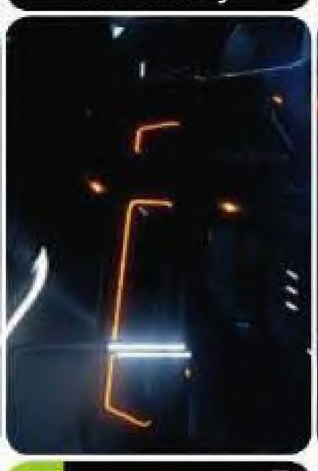
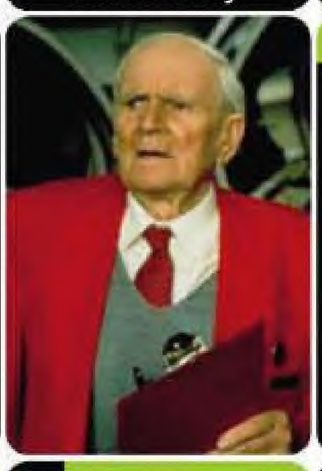
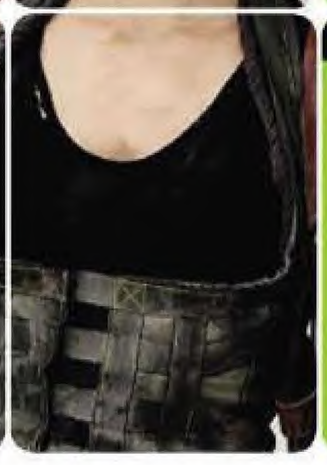
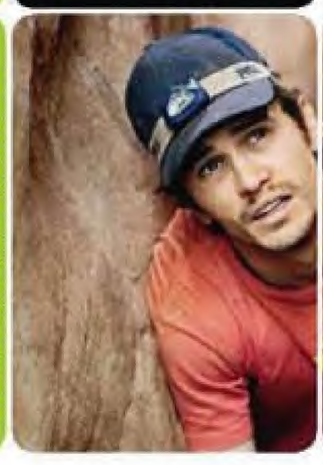
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Tech diary

The world of AV and film changes fast. **Our calendar** is here to make sure you don't miss out



Foxy chick: Megan Fox in *Jonah Hex* as the tart-with-a-heart

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
				**17** **Tron Legacy** The '80s cult sci-fi adventure finally gets itself a sequel, and a dazzling 3D one at that! Find out what all of the fuss is about when the film opens at UK cinemas today www.disney.co.uk		**19** **R.I.P** Welsh actor Desmond Wilkinson Llewelyn passed away on this day in 1999, aged 85. He remains best known for his portrayal of MI6 lab boffin Q in 17 James Bond films
	**21** **'Heigh-Ho'** Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the world's first full-length animated film, premiered to an audience that included Charlie Chaplin, Clark Gable and Marlene Dietrich on this day in 1937	**22** **Chatroom** This Wednesday sees the UK cinema release of this thriller about the perils of online chatrooms. At last, Asian horror icon Hideo 'Ringu' Nakata directs a film without creepy long-haired ghosts www.revolvergroup.com	**23** **Transfer resistor** The transistor, a key component, if not the fundamental building block of modern electronic devices, was first demonstrated at AT&T's Bell Laboratories on this day in 1947	**24** **Radio times** On this day in 1906, Reginald Fessenden used a synchronous rotary spark transmitter to make the first radio broadcast, consisting of him playing the violin and reading passages from the Bible. Sounds a lot like Radio 4, really	**25** **Merry Christmas!** Swap gifts, stuffyourself with turkey and mince pies and then settle back for an afternoon of *EastEnders*, The Queen's Speech and Matt Smith's first *Doctor Who* Christmas special!	**26** **Gulliver's Travels** Hollywood reworks Swift's classic satire as a big budget, 3D, Jack Black comedy, directed by the helmer of animated hit *Monsters vs Aliens*. Catch it at cinemas across the UK from today www.fox.co.uk
27 **Jonah Hex** This Western-themed comic book adaptation flopped at the box office, but the promise of Megan Fox as a tart-with-a-heart may drum up more interest for the DVD and BD out in the UK today www.warnerbros.co.uk				**31** **The Big Sleep** Selected cinemas around the UK will be getting a very special gift this Xmas as BFI Distribution puts its weight behind a limited re-release of this hardboiled 1946 Howard Hawks' classic www.bfi.org.uk		
3 **A Serbian film** The year's most controversial film debuts on DVD and BD in the UK today, albeit somewhat truncated after the BBFC demanded cuts of more than four minutes www.revolvergroup.com			**6** **2011 International CES** The entire AV industry (and *HCC*) will decamp to Las Vegas once again for the world's biggest consumer electronics show, which runs from today until 9 Jan www.cesweb.org	**7** **127 hours** Danny '*Slumdog Millionaire*' Boyle directs this fact-based film about a mountain climber who becomes trapped under a boulder in an isolated canyon in Utah. *127 Hours* hits UK cinemas today www.fox.co.uk		
10 **Resident Evil: Afterlife** The fourth film in the popular zombie-flavoured videogame spin-off becomes Sony Pictures' first day-and-date DVD/BD/3DBD release. Truly a new dimension in terror www.sonypictures.co.uk			**13** ***HCC* #191** Start saving your pennies for your favourite home cinema magazine. It's on the stands this Thursday, packed to the gills with hardware tests, features, outspoken opinion and full-on software reviews. www.homecinemachoice.com			

JAN

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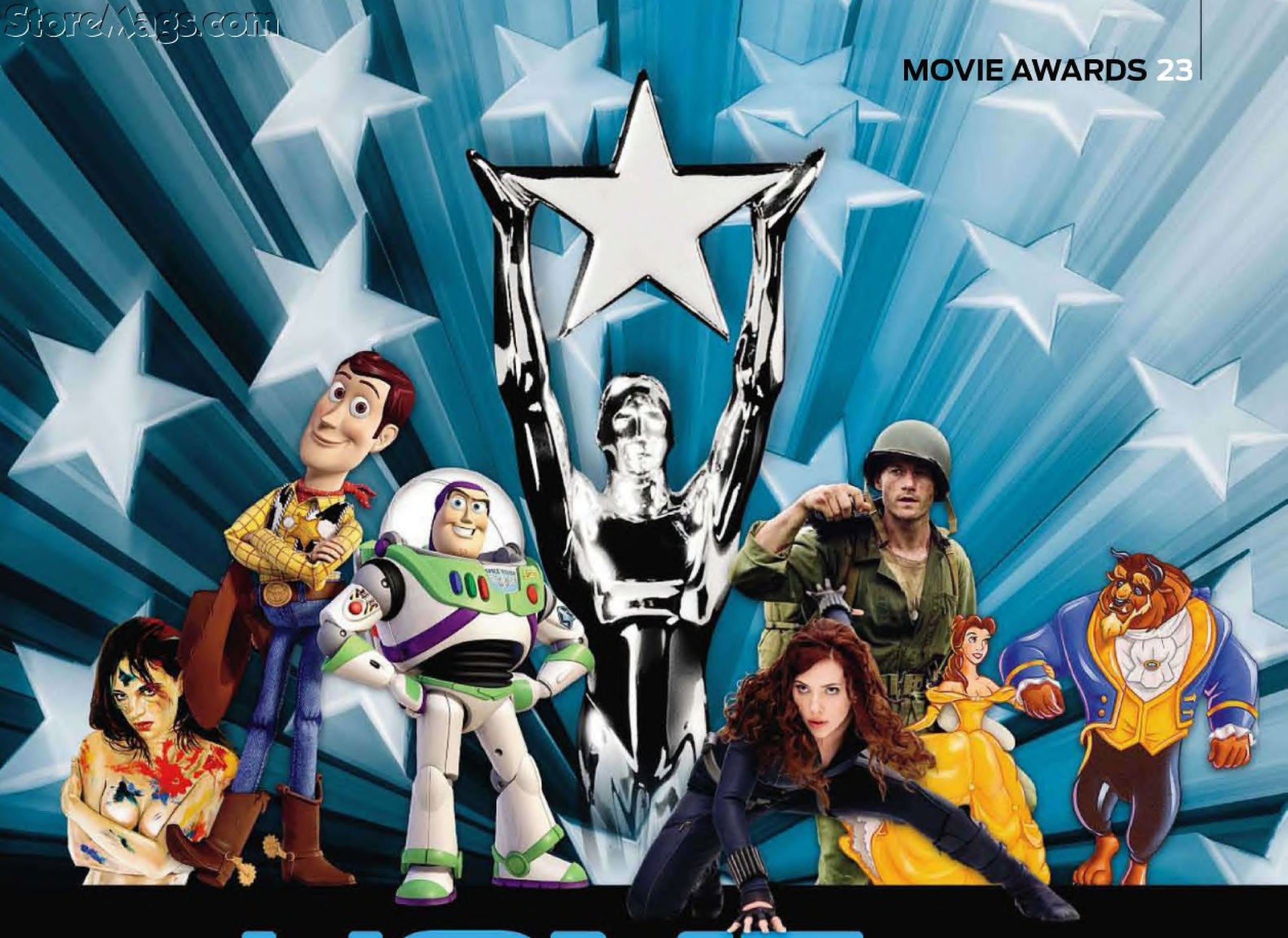
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HOME CINEMA Choice

Movie Awards 2010

From *Avatar* and *Alien* to *Iron Man 2* and *Ice Age 3D*, it's been a great year for Blu-ray. But which discs can't you live without? Join us as we celebrate the very best software releases of the last 12 months, so you'll know exactly what to add to your collection...

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BEST PICTURE QUALITY

Winner: **Avatar**

The original Blu-ray release of James Cameron's mega blockbuster still features the best 1080p encode we've seen all year. The 1.78:1 image is a pleasure to watch on your bigscreen, with not a trace of artificial sharpening, digital noise reduction or compression artefacting – just incredible detail, vibrant colours and blacks worthy of deep space itself. The 3D Blu-ray release has a lot to live up to...

All-region BD, 20th Century Fox, *HCC #183*

Also nominated...

Alice in Wonderland Journey down the rabbit hole and you'll be rewarded by stunning visuals.

All-region BD, Walt Disney Home Entertainment, *HCC #184*

Iron Man 2 The Blu-ray of this comic book caper features reference-standard HD imagery.

All-region BD, Paramount Home Entertainment, *HCC #188*

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"You are **not in Kansas** anymore, you are **on Pandora**"

Stephen Lang, Avatar



BEST PACKAGING

Winner: **City of the Living Dead**

Another year and another zombie classic from Arrow Video walks away with our Best Packaging award. And for good reason; every single aspect of this release suits the film perfectly. From the use of international promo art on the postcards, poster and alternate sleeves, to the interview-packed booklet and the new painted art that encapsulates the feel of the film better than any photo ever could.

All-region BD/R2 DVD, Arrow Video, *HCC #183*

Also nominated...

Psycho: 50th Anniversary Special Edition A suitably stark and stylish steelbook for Hitchcock's classic.

All-region BD, Universal Pictures, *HCC #186*

Alien Anthology: Limited Edition Collector's Set This light-up Alien warrior and egg is worth the £90 tag.

All-region BD, 20th Century Fox, *HCC #188*

BEST REMASTERING

Winner: **Psycho**

Who would have thought that a studio so prone to going overboard with digital noise reduction would produce the best hi-def remaster of the year? The beautifully nuanced image delivers superb contrast levels, magnificent detailing and – most surprising of all – a completely intact grain structure. In other words, this murderous masterpiece has never looked better, and we can only hope that Universal continues this trend on future catalogue titles.

All-region BD, Universal Pictures, *HCC #186*

Also nominated...

City Girl She might be 80 years old now, but FW Murnau's *City Girl* looks more beautiful than ever.

All-region BD, Eureka, *HCC #180*

Aliens Arguably the visual highlight of the *Alien Anthology* boxset, and proof that you can reduce excess grain without losing fine detail.

All-region BD, 20th Century Fox, *HCC #188*



Funniest Films

Zombieland: There are more gags than gore in this fun trip to a world overrun with the undead. And who can forget that wonderful cameo...

Get Him to the Greek: The music industry is an easy target, but does it really matter when Russell Brand and chums can get this many great gags out of it?

BEST DVD EXCLUSIVE

Winner: **House [Hausu]**

One of the undoubted highlights of this year's Masters of Cinema lineup was this insane, experimental 1977 Japanese horror from director Obayashi Nobuhkio. It's the kind of film you'd never even expect to see get a UK release, but, as always, Eureka went the extra mile, and served up a beautifully restored anamorphic 1.55:1 transfer, 88 minutes of interviews covering every aspect of the film's genesis, the trailer, and a booklet about the film and its creator.

R2 DVD, Eureka, *HCC #179*

Also nominated...

Doctor Who: Revisitations 1 The Restoration Team add improved transfers and oodles of new extras to three classic stories.

R2 DVD, 2entertain Ltd, *HCC #189*

Possession Freaky art-house horror with a gorgeous transfer and fascinating retrospective doc.

R2 DVD, Second Sight, *HCC #188*

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"C'mon... let's go see how much we're going for on eBay"

John Ratzenberger, Toy Story 3



3D BLU-RAY

Winner: **A Christmas Carol: 3D Super Play**

Disney's first 3D Blu-ray release is the best example yet of what the stereoscopic hi-def format is capable of. This animated adaptation of Dickens' famous tale is packed with eye-popping treats, from simple atmospheric effects like snow drifting past your eyes, to more dramatic fare like the nightmarish ghoul that glowers out of the screen. Highly impressive – and it doesn't hurt that the movie's good fun, too.

All-region BD, Walt Disney Home Entertainment, *HCC #190, p100*

Also nominated...

Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs The world's first full HD 3D retail release made a big splash with its absorbing visuals and fun extras.

All-region BD, Sony Pictures, *HCC #185*

Ice Age 3: Dawn of the Dinosaurs This early Panasonic-exclusive features razor-sharp 3D effects.

All-region BD, 20th Century Fox, *HCC #185*

WORLD CINEMA

Winner: **A Prophet**

Given the hype surrounding *A Prophet*'s release, Optimum could have released this award-winning French prison drama on a bare-bones platter and it still would have sold bucketloads. Thankfully, it didn't, choosing to support the extremely filmic hi-def encode of the movie with a pair of engrossing documentaries that cover every aspect of the filmmaking process.

Region B BD, Optimum Home Entertainment, *HCC #183, p103*

Also nominated...

Thirst A relative lack of extras is more than made up for by this disc's stunning hi-def imagery.

Region B BD, Palisades Tartan, *HCC #179*

La Planete Sauvage Another spectacular Masters of Cinema disc with an exquisite restored transfer.

Region B BD, Eureka Entertainment, *HCC #187*



Best SFX

Folding City (Inception): Ariadne (Ellen Page) creates the Paris of her dreams in this mind-melting sequence

Iron Man vs Whiplash (Iron Man 2): From the debut of the Iron Man briefcase 'suit' to the ensuing fight, this scene is packed with spectacular VFX effects that make *The Matrix* look like *Blake's Seven.*

ANIMATION

Winner: **Toy Story 3**

Given its track record, we might as well change the name of this gong to 'Best Walt Disney Release'. Still, there's no arguing with quality, and once again the House of Mouse has blown away the competition with its latest Blu-ray blockbuster. *Toy Story 3* offers razor-sharp AVC 1080p visuals and a thrilling DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundtrack, and is a disc you'll come back to time-and-again to show off your system to envious friends and neighbours.

Region B BD/R2 DVD, Walt Disney Home Entertainment, *HCC #190*

Also nominated...

Evangelion: 1.11 - You Are (Not) Alone The angelic anime classic is reborn for the hi-def generation.

Region B BD, Manga Entertainment, *HCC #182*

Beauty and the Beast: Diamond Edition An incredible Blu-ray package for one of Disney's best.

All-region BD/R2 DVD, Walt Disney Home Entertainment, *HCC #189*

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BEST AUDIO QUALITY

Winner: **The Pacific**

This ten-part TV miniseries excels in many ways, but it's the DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack that really grabs your attention. The battle scenes are a masterclass in audio design. Not only do they make full use of the soundstage – as bullets fly all around you and bass-heavy explosions shake your bone – but there's always a tightness and precision to the acoustics that even Hollywood's biggest blockbusters struggle to match.

All-region BD, HBO Home Entertainment, *HCC #188*

Also nominated...

Toy Story 3 A relentlessly creative and entirely engrossing DTS-HD Master Audio 7.1 mix.

Region B BD/R2 DVD, Walt Disney Home Entertainment, *HCC #190*

Robin Hood: Director's Cut Ridley Scott's epic dazzles with its unexpected aural complexity.

All-region BD, Universal Pictures, *HCC #187*

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"I promised myself, **I'm gonna die** for something that **counts**"

Sylvester Stallone, The Expendables



TV BOXSET

Winner: **The Pacific**

This companion piece to the award-winning *Band of Brothers* had a lot to live up to. But, once again, producers Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks delivered the goods. Not only is the show itself absolutely riveting, this six-disc Blu-ray boxset also ensures that it looks and sounds better than many blockbuster movies we've looked at. And all the action is supported by a generous selection of fascinating extras.

All-region BD, HBO Home Entertainment, *HCC #189*

Also nominated...

Twin Peaks: Definitive Gold Box Edition The remastered transfers and abundant extras make for a damn fine boxset.

R2 DVD, Universal Playback, *HCC #181*

Doctor Who: Revisitations 1

Three older 'classic Who' releases given an exciting new lick of paint

R2 DVD, 2entertain Ltd, *HCC #189*

Would you pick a fight with any one of The Expendables, let alone all of them?

FIGHT OF THE YEAR

Winner: **Statham & Li vs Gary Daniels (The Expendables)**

There are numerous punch-ups in *The Expendables*, but this sequence in the final act is our favourite. Kickboxing whizz Gary Daniels goes toe-to-toe with both Jet Li and Jason Statham – under the watchful eye of legendary choreographer Corey Yuen – in a frenetic, ingenious scrap that's manna from heaven for martial arts fans.

Region B BD, Lionsgate, *HCC #190*

Also nominated...

Hit Girl vs The Mafia (Kick-Ass)

The young vigilante decimates a horde of goons in the thrilling finale.

All-region BD, Universal Pictures, *HCC #187*

The Rotating Hotel (Inception)

Chris Nolan's dreamworld serves up the most inventive brawl in years.

All-region BD, Warner Home Video, *HCC #190*

EXTRA FEATURE OF THE YEAR

Winner: **MU-TH-UR Mode (Alien Anthology)**

The *Alien Anthology* is accompanied by so many extras that it's difficult to know where to start – which is where MU-TH-UR Mode comes in. This interactive viewing tool allows *Alien* fans to cherry-pick specific material of interest while watching the movies and then access it directly when you pop in the bonus discs. No more wading through everything to get to the stuff you're really interested in – genius!

All-region BD, 20th Century Fox, *HCC #188*

Also nominated...

Maximum Comedy Mode (Cop Out) Kevin Smith's hilarious take on Warner's Maximum Movie Mode.

All-region BD, Warner Home Video, *HCC #188*

Ultimate Recon Mode (The Expendables) Go behind the scenes of Stallone's action extravaganza with this picture-in-picture wizard.

Region B BD, Lionsgate, *HCC #190*

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"Don't play with that – you'll go blind!"

Sigourney Weaver, Avatar









LABEL OF THE YEAR

Winner: **Arrow Video**

Cult film fans had plenty to celebrate this year as Arrow Video took it upon itself to become the one-stop-shop for everything weird and wonderful on Blu-ray and DVD. But what really endeared Arrow to connoisseurs like ourselves was the care and attention evident in every aspect – from stunning transfers and in-depth extras, through to the collectible packaging with newly commissioned artwork by the brilliant Rick Melton.

Also nominated...

Eureka Entertainment Last year's winners had another spectacular year, with both The Masters of Cinema Series and unexpected treats like *Paranoiac!* and *Wizards*.

20th Century Fox Home Entertainment Despite one notable misstep (see right), Fox unleashed an avalanche of must-own Blu-rays throughout the year.

DISC FAIL

Winner: **I Spit on Your Grave: Ultimate Edition**

Where do we even start? How about the horrifically blocky hi-def encode that looks like nothing better than a poor SD upconvert? Or what about the bonus DVD copy that turns out to be an obvious NTSC-to-PAL conversion complete with ghosting and motion judder? And then there's the fact that although the film is edited, nobody bothered to check the commentary, which runs too long and is cut-off mid-stream!

Region B BD/R2 DVD, 101 Films, *HCC online*

Also nominated...

Predator: The Ultimate Hunter Edition Overzealous DNR obliterates detail and turns the cast into wax.

All-region BD, 20th Century Fox, *HCC #185*

Mars Attacks! Excessive edge-enhancement and a complete lack of extras make this BD a disaster.

All-region BD, Warner Home Entertainment, *HCC #187*



Kills of the Year

Kick-Ass: This film certainly lives up to its title, when 10-year-old vigilante Hit Girl hacks off a drug dealer's legs and stabs him in the back!

Predators: Former death row inmate Stans (Walton Goggins) takes on a Predator one-on-one and gets his spine ripped out for his trouble. A kill worthy of the original.

ICON OF THE YEAR

Winner: **James Cameron**

Following an extended leave of absence from Hollywood, self-confessed 'king of the world' James Cameron returned to usher in a new dawn for 3D with his blockbuster smash *Avatar*. And, not content with single-handedly changing the face of modern cinema, the outspoken filmmaker is also a huge home cinema fan championing the Blu-ray format and full HD 3D at every possibility. Face it, Hollywood and your home cinema would be a much duller place without him.

Also nominated...

Robert Downey Jr. This Home Cinema Hero has risen back to the top of the Hollywood pecking order thanks to recent hits such as *Sherlock Holmes* and *Iron Man 2*.

Chloe Moretz This young actress stole the show as the foul-mouthed, ultra-violent Hit Girl in *Kick-Ass*. Could be a star of the future in the making...

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BEST DEMO SEQUENCE

Winner: **Avatar (133:00-145:50)**

If you're looking for one movie scene to show off your system, spin up the *Avatar* Blu-ray and the final showdown between the humans and Na'vi. Fox's high bitrate AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode bursts with exquisite detailing and colour, while the entire soundstage gets a thorough workout thanks to the dynamic, bullet-strewn DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix. Play it loud and proud.

All-region BD, 20th Century Fox, *HCC #183*

Also nominated...

Toy Story 3 The opening chase is a *tour de force* of stunning hi-def visuals and DTS-HD MA 7.1 sonics.

Region B BD, Walt Disney Home Entertainment, *HCC #190*

Robin Hood: Director's Cut Ridley Scott gives Spielberg a run for his money with the climatic beach invasion scene.

All-region BD, Universal Pictures, *HCC #187*


1


2

The thunder of hooves rumbles across your speakers as the Na'vi ride into battle


3


4

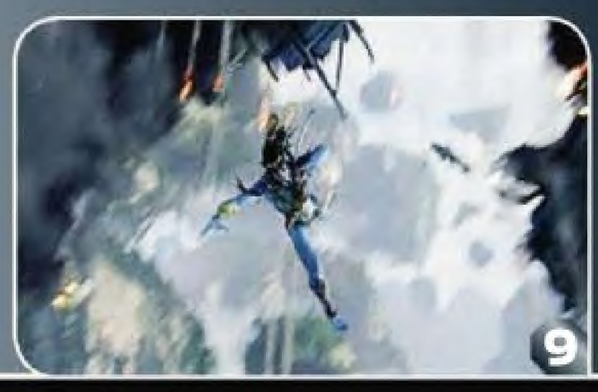

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Who needs full HD 3D when you have a 1080p 2D image this spectacular?


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9

Bass heads will thrill to the explosive LFE in the sequence's finale

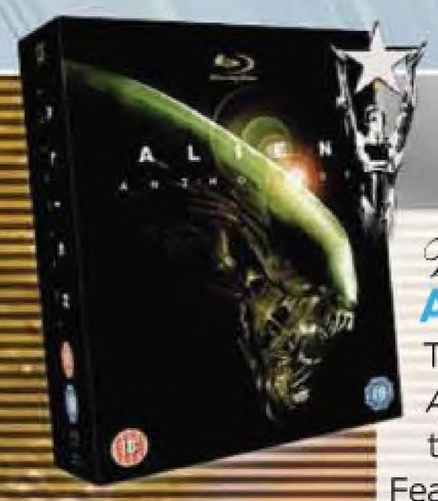
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"Get away from her you bitch!"

Sigourney Weaver, *Aliens*



DISC OF THE YEAR

Winner:

Alien Anthology

Twentieth Century Fox's five-disc *Alien Anthology* boxset is easily the standout release of the year. Featuring lovingly restored hi-def transfers of all four films (with *Aliens*, in particular, benefitting from extensive work), and a mountain full of bonus features, it deserves to take centre stage in your movie library. The movies themselves showcase the very best the horror, sci-fi and action genres have to offer.

All-region BD, Twentieth Century Fox, *HCC #188*

Also nominated...

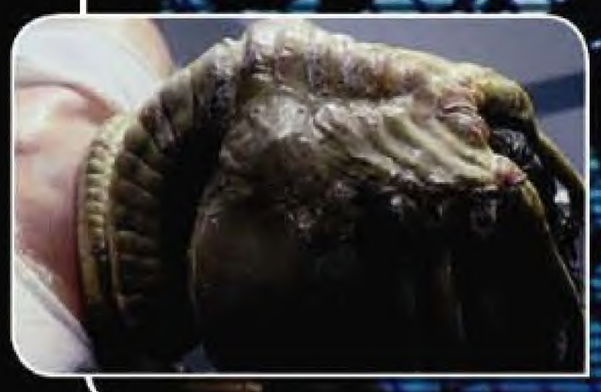
Toy Story 3: Triple Play Edition With its 7.1 DTS-HD mix and pixel perfect picture, Disney's Blu-ray release is indispensable.

Region B BD, Walt Disney Home Entertainment, *HCC #190*

Iron Man 2 Great film, great sound, great visuals. A Blu-ray worthy of superhero status.

All-region BD, Paramount Home Entertainment, *HCC #188*

18 years of horror: *Alien*, *Aliens*, *Alien*^{3} and *Alien Resurrection*









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- A10AV12 - What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision August 2010



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An audience with a visionary

James Cameron says the extended *Avatar* on BD is an 'alternate experience'. **Steve May** agrees







HD evangelists: James Cameron and producer Jon Landau (right) discussing the *Avatar: Extended Collector's Edition* Blu-ray at Blu-Con (top)

James Cameron is addressing the annual industry Blu-Con confab in California. Linked in via web feeds are specially invited guests from around the globe, including *HCC*.

'3D is here and it's here to stay,' he states. 'I think it's going to be the way we watch all our media, in the movie theatres and at home, within 8-10 years.'

'All it will take,' he predicts, 'is the development of autostereoscopic [glasses-free 3D displays]. We need to find the extra [panel] resolution to make that possible.'

There's little doubt that Tinseltown's executives believe what he says. This is a creator in perfect sync with both his audience and the technology zeitgeist.

The director is quick to dismiss the failure of previous iterations of 3D. 'They had a lot of quality issues in the field projecting 3D. Technical reasons,' he says. 'This is different. We're going to have to be agile to keep up. It's not a question of 3D slowly rolling out. We've already leapfrogged over steps that I thought were going to take years. Suddenly we've got these great sets and you can watch 3D in the home.'

An alternate world

In point of fact, Cameron isn't at Blu-Con to tub-thump 3D; he's here to talk about the *Avatar Extended Collector's Edition Blu-ray* (2D) release. Given that the original BD transpired to be the best-selling disc of the year, the new Extended Edition could prove a mainstream tipping point for the format.

'We had to make some creative decisions about this new digital medium, to use it correctly,' he explains.

For those yet to succumb, the bumper three-disc Blu-ray release offers no fewer than three versions of the groundbreaking film: the original theatrical cut, the Special Edition reissue with an extra nine minutes and a fully extended version with 16 minutes of additional footage. One of the big changes with the extended version is a sequence set on Earth before Jake Scully travels to Pandora. Cameron describes this

Triple whammy: The new BD release offers three versions of the movie

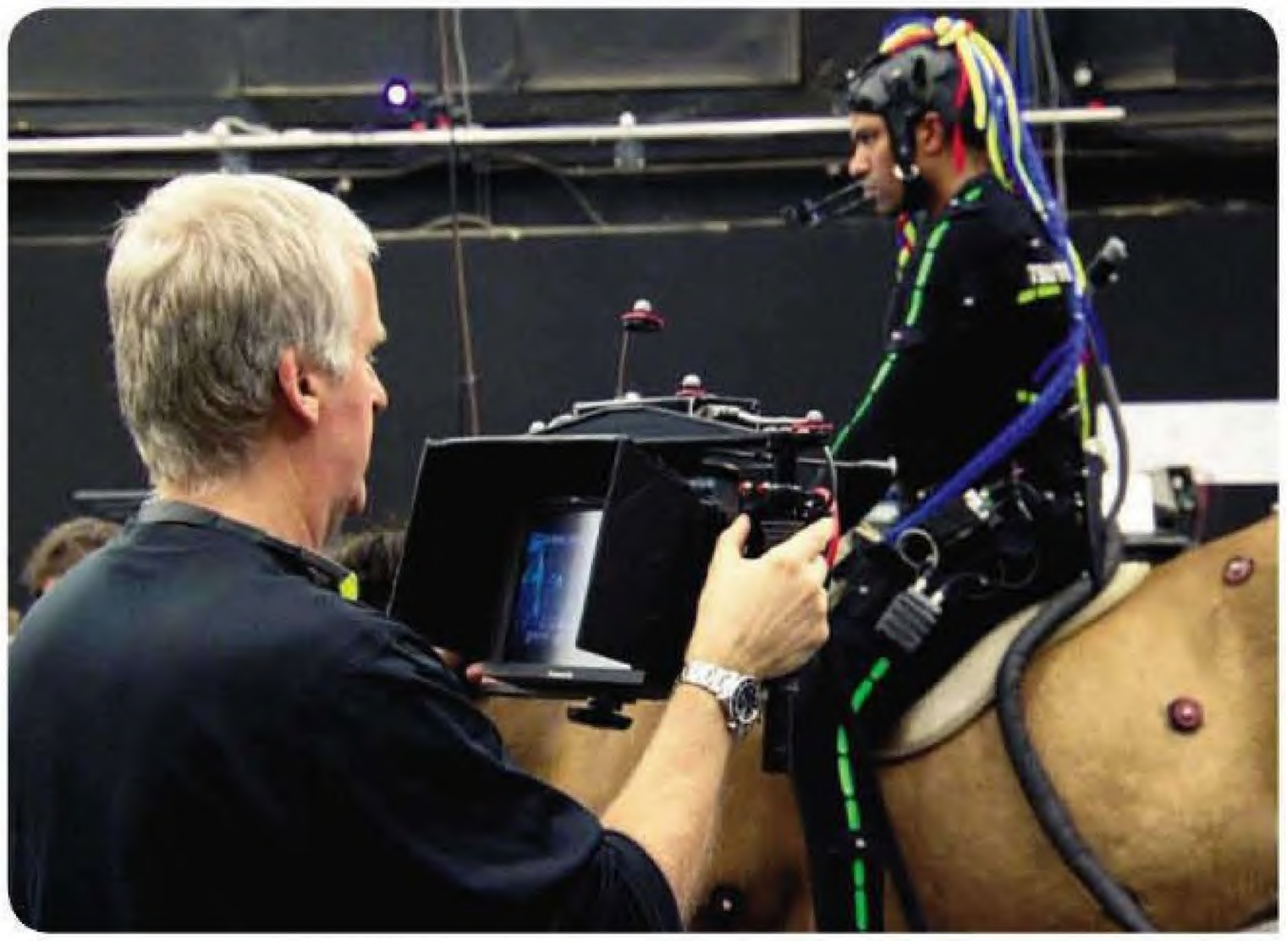


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Mocap magic: Cameron used real-time rendering (top left) to see how his actors' performances would look in the finished film





Blu-ray brilliance: As well as the 16 minutes of extra footage, the BD offers 47 minutes of deleted scenes for *Avatar* fans to devour

Extended Edition as 'an alternate experience of the movie.'

This extra footage is key to why *Avatar* was first released in a bare-bones format; the new material wasn't ready. 'Weta Digital in New Zealand worked until the end of the Summer to generate the finished quality effects for the Extended version of the movie. They put into it the same discipline, the same technology and the same creativity that they did for the theatrical version of the movie, thanks to Fox's (financial) support.' With production costs hitting $1m (US) a minute, this new set is a huge investment in time and money.

In addition to newly integrated material, **Weta also fully rendered a standalone action scene, which never made it into the final cut.** It's an astonishing sequence in which hordes of Na'vi hunt down a rampaging Sturmbeast. For fans, this should be worth the cost of admission alone.

'I told our team we don't want to come back over and over, digging up more footage that people haven't seen before. I want this to be definitive, to have everything that a fan could possibly want. I wanted everything about the making of, all the deleted scenes, everything about the production design.'

The result is an exhaustive amount of supplemental material, including 47 minutes of deleted scenes excised from the film at various stages in production.

'A lot of the scenes we took out of the film, we felt didn't re-integrate, and we also couldn't afford to finish all 47 minutes up to that level of (theatrical) quality. So we put them into the supplements, and contextualised them so you know where they were in the film and can kind of imagine what it would have been like. We've finished them up to a level of quality to what we call The Template. This is our real-time render process. It doesn't look photo real, but it looks very good. You'll clearly be able to see that the scenes aren't done, but they'll feel complete.'

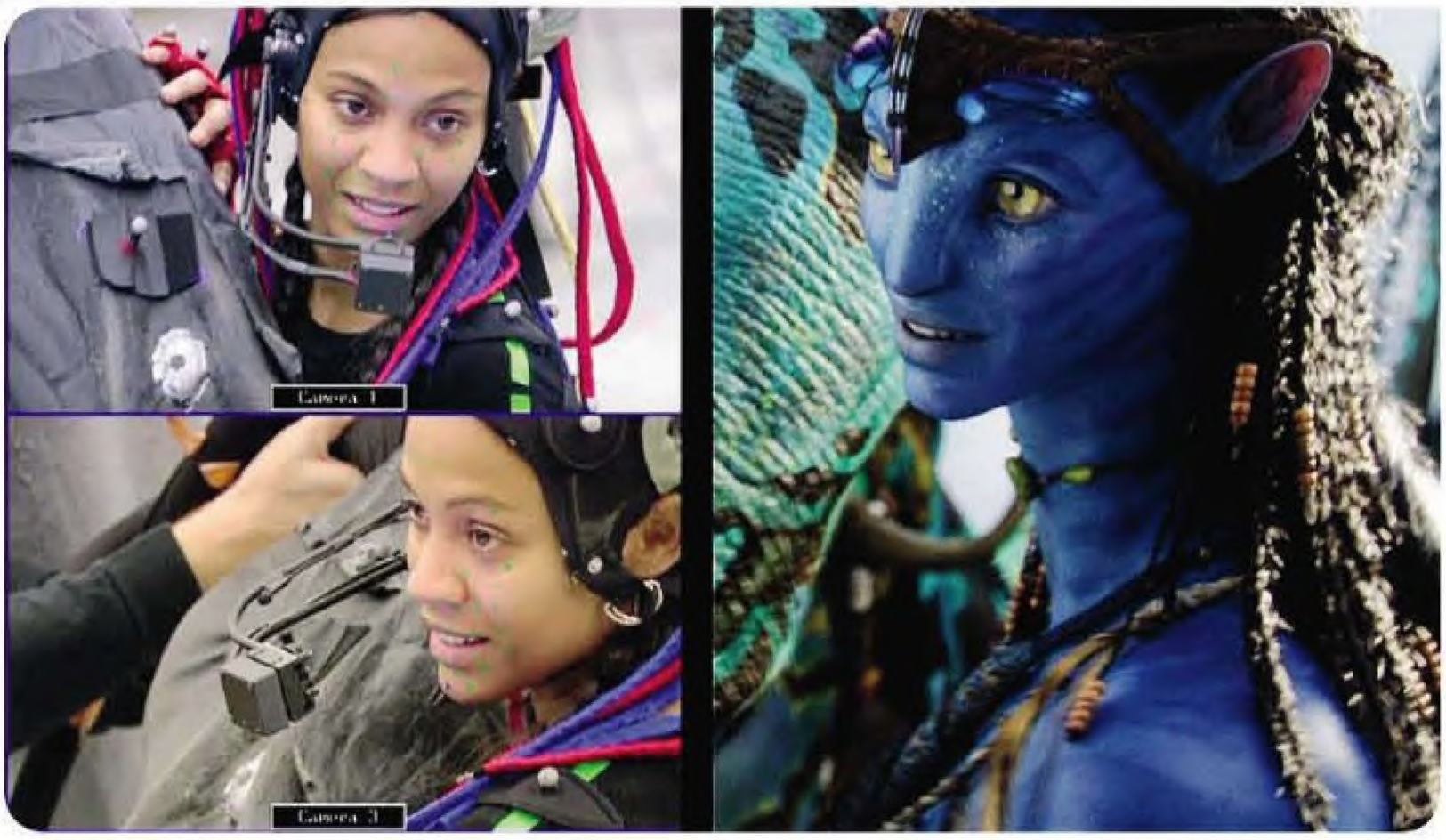
The big advance

James Cameron maintains that, for him at least, >

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Hair-raising: To play the dreadlocked Na'vi heroine Neytiri, Zoe Saldana even wore performance-capturing hair extensions





Rich man's game: Rendering the new footage cost Fox around $1m a minute

3D wasn't *Avatar*'s big advance. Instead, it was the development of believable performance capture technology. 'We wanted to create fully emotional, fully articulate and fully realised photorealistic characters. So we spent two years just in R&D development figuring out how to make the process work.'

Mocap techniques had been evolving from *LOTR*'s Gollum and Zemeckis' *The Polar Express*, but with *Avatar* they made a quantum leap.

'Blu-ray lets us show the process; you can literally click between the layers,' explains Cameron. 'The first layer (of the scene-deconstruction feature) is the mocap crazy stuff. The second layer is what that translates to when we first turn it into CG, that's our real time rendering environment; it looks like a video game,' explains the director. 'That was our sandbox, our creative workspace, where I designed all the shots and locked in the finished cut of a sequence, called The Template. There are several layers from there which we don't show, and then on the final layer is the finished look of the film.'

Cameron says that while real time renders took only a 30th of a second per frame to create, the finished photo-realistic images produced by Weta took between 50-100 hours per frame. 'Then you had to double that for the 3D release. So you can see there are several orders of magnitude more in terms of computer power required.'

The BD also makes use of the multiple language option, to offer a 'family audio track'. Cameron came up with the idea after taking flack from his wife. 'The original movie was PG 13 rated (in the US) because of language. Now I have a three-year-old, six-year-old and nine-year-old, who all wanted to watch the movie over and over again. So my six-year-old was running around the house saying 'shit, goddammit' for weeks. Under that pressure, it popped into my head that one of the things you can do on a disc set like this is create an alternate audio choice, a family-friendly track. So we took all the ADR we had done for the network TV release and substituted the language; the picture cut is the same. The result is a version you can watch with your kids and not flinch every time'

Jim'll fix it

James Cameron talks 2D-3D conversion

The lure of high ticket prices for 3D films is fuelling debate about whether to convert from 2D into 3D. The money men love it. The danger is that bad quality *faux* 3D could kill the golden goose.

'That's what happened to *Clash of The Titans*,' says Cameron. 'I don't mean to throw that movie under the bus, because my buddy Sam [Worthington] is in it, but I think everybody realised that this was the point at which people had gone too far. You can't do a good 3D conversion of a two-hour 2D movie like they [Warner Bros] tried to do without opening up the post-production schedule.'

'The same studio made the same mistake with *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* [which was initially announced as a 3D theatrical release] and they are really getting spanked for it,' says Cameron.

Cameron thinks movies should be shot in 3D, or studios should be prepared to spend the money and the time to do a conversion that's indistinguishable from having it shot in the format. 'To do that, I would say that realistically you would need [to factor] six months into your post production schedule that wasn't there before.'

He argues that post conversion should only be used on popular library titles, such as *Jaws*, *ET*



or *Indiana Jones*. Indeed, he is working on a conversion of his own *Titanic*, for a 2012 release.

'For me right now, if you want to release a movie in 3D, make a movie in 3D. It's much more natural, much more intuitive for the filmmaker. You can see the results on a day-to-day basis and it makes the medium fun. It shouldn't be forced down by the studios onto the filmmakers as a layer after the fact. It should be an integral part of the cinematic art. Do it right and give the audience the premium quality experience they are paying for with their premium ticket price.'

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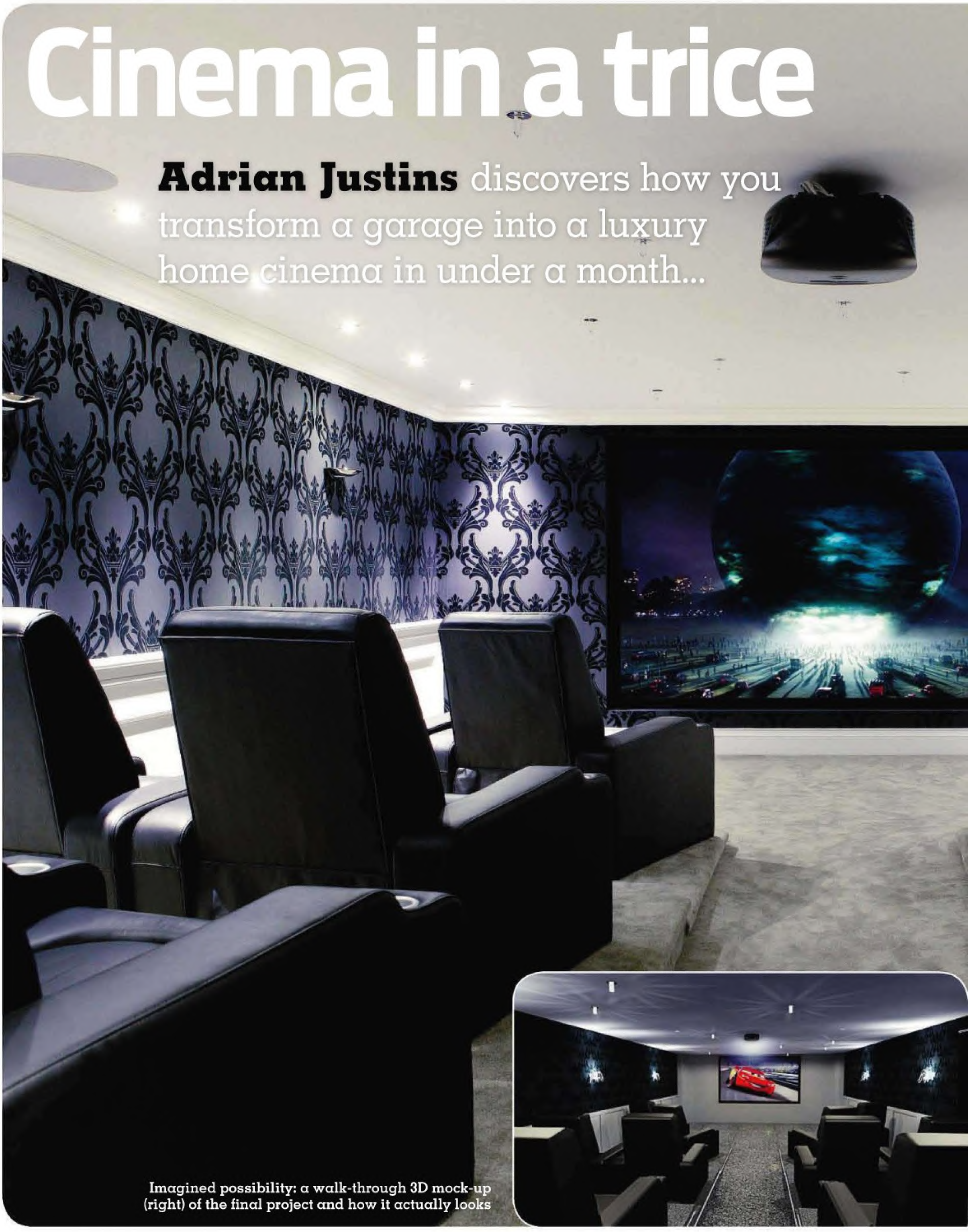
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Cinema in a trice

Adrian Justins discovers how you transform a garage into a luxury home cinema in under a month...



Imagined possibility: a walk-through 3D mock-up (right) of the final project and how it actually looks

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Kit Checklist

Crestron: Prodigy control processor
Crestron: Prodigy 4in in-wall touch panel
Crestron: Prodigy PTX3 handheld touch panel
Crestron: 4 circuit light dimming module
Runco: LS5 projector with short throw lens option
Screen Research: 120in acoustically transparent fixed screen
Sherbourn: PT7020a processor
Sherbourn: 7 x 200W power amp
Apple: Apple TV
Sky: Sky+ HD Box
Denon DBP-1610 Blu-ray player
Sony PlayStation 3
Procella: 3 x P8 speakers (behind screen)
Procella: P15 Twin 15in subwoofer (behind screen)
Current Audio: 4 x FastLoc 804 FL in-ceiling speakers
Signature: 12 x Black leather cinema seats

Custom installation can be a challenging business. This sumptuous room, now the entertainment playground of an internet entrepreneur, was transformed from a garage into a high-end home cinema in just three weeks by Salisbury-based company, Lime Green. The room was an empty shell at the outset and no amount of descriptions and CAD drawings could really show what Lime Green were looking to achieve – it won the contract by using a photo-realistic 3D environment created by a company called Digitati.

'We showed it to the owner, who commissioned us to commence work after a few minor seating changes,' said Lime Green's Laurie Painter.

The project was also a partnership with Pulse Marketing who, sensitive to the timescale and need for top-performing, reliable kit with prompt and efficient backup, suggested a list of products that suited the budget and look.

With everything bar the ceiling-mounted Runco LS5 projector, hidden from sight, Pulse was able to recommend CI-specific Procella Audio speakers. The fronts – a pair of 1,000W Procella Audio P8s and a Procella Audio twin 15in Sub – were installed behind an acoustically transparent 120in Screen Research display. Looking upwards at the rear of the room, you can make out four Current Audio FastLoc 804 FL in-ceiling speakers.

All other equipment, including an Apple TV, Sky+ HD and PS3 is hidden in a purpose-built hub at the back of the room. The guts of the system is a 7 x 200W power amplifier from Sherbourn and a PT7020a processor. That's some serious welly lurking unseen from the comfort of the leather Signature Cinema Seats.

Control of the system, including four lighting circuits, comes by virtue of a Crestron Prodigy PTX3 full colour touchscreen remote and a PTL4 in-wall user interface.

I'm told that the closing stages of the build took on the atmosphere of a TV make-over programme with every conceivable building and decorating trade working away, plus six CI specialists tripping over each other to complete their work in time.

The room was finally completed late into the night the day before the owner arrived and declared himself ecstatically happy with the results. Apparently he's fond of cranking it up and driving the meaty Procellas to their mind-blowing maximum. >

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A Creature comforts

These top-quality Signature Cinema leather chairs have electronically controlled reclining and foot rests

B Curtain call

The drapes are lined with black-out material, backed up by black-out blinds on the windows

C Lights, camera, action

Four lighting circuits were required for the 40+ recessed halogen lights

D Above and beyond

Almost unnoticeable, yet boasting 150W of power handling, Current Audio's in-ceiling speakers have 8in carbon fibre cones with 1in ceramic coated aluminium dome

E Hands-on control

The Crestron Prodigy PTX3 can graphically display song updates, temperature readings, light levels and more

F Reach out and touch

The Crestron Prodigy in-wall touchpanel replicates all of the PTX3's functions including playlist navigation on an iPod or iPhone

G Living on the ceiling

An *HCC* 5-star award winner, the Runco LS-5 is capable of superbly sharp pictures with minimal rainbow effect and true colours. It can also achieve high brightness and dynamism without compromising contrast

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Certified: AV-holic!

Every issue, an **HCC reader** invites you to take a tour of their beloved home cinema setup...









Father figure: AV-holic Brian donates surplus hardware to his son

Introduce yourself...
I'm Brian Roberts, 50 years old.
And you're an AV-holic?
Yes, I have been into home cinema since the early 1980s, with my first Betamax VCR and then VHS. I have evolved my system over time, collecting a new piece of equipment as the technology has evolved.
What's in your current setup?
A Panasonic TH-46PZ85B plasma screen, TVonics Freeview receiver, Pioneer DV-575A multi-region DVD player, Sony BDP-S300 Blu-ray player, Onkyo TX-NR807 receiver, and a surround sound system using KEF Q series and KEF Ci in-walls, plus an MK VX7mkII subwoofer.
What was your last addition?
The Onkyo TX-NR807, so I could use the receiver to upscale standard DVD and get the improved HD audio codecs. I'm very impressed with the sound quality of the new equipment over my original Yamaha RX1400 receiver.
What will be your next equipment purchase?
I am looking at replacing the Blu-ray player to a later version, possibly the Sony BDP-S370 or the new Cambridge Audio Azur 650BD.
How much have you spent on your AV habit over the years?
Around £20,000 on new equipment and around £10,000 on DVDs and BDs.
What does your family think of your hobby?
My wife enjoys watching the movies and gets maximum use out of the TVonics box as she can record all the TV series she likes. My eldest son also uses my older equipment in his bedroom to watch movies and play PS3 games.
What's your current fave disc?
I'm a great fan of *Watchmen* and the recent *Star Trek* movie.
Are you excited about 3D?
I've had a demo of a Samsung 3D screen. The picture quality was great and an improvement over cardboard glasses

Room essentials

A Full HD hero
This 46in Panasonic plasma may be a couple of years old now, but it still offers cinematic 1080p visuals

B Q for quality
KEF's respected Q series loudspeakers take charge of the front soundstage, although a M&K subwoofer handles the low-end duties

C Time for a change?
This Sony BDP-S300 Blu-ray spinner may soon be replaced by the brand's BDP-S370, or Cambridge Audio's Azur 650BD

D Sonic step up
The recent addition of an Onkyo TX-NR807 receiver has brought an improvement in sound quality to Brian's room

E Discreet discrete
KEF custom-install, in-wall speakers are used for the rear channels

Join the club

Do you want to see your home cinema system featured in the pages of *Home Cinema Choice*? If so, log on to www.homecinemachoice.com/avholic where you'll find all the information you need.

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REVIEWS

→Hardware highlights **SAMSUNG** 65in 3D LED TV and designer 7.1 system **DENON** AVR-2311 receiver **PANASONIC** 42in 3DTV and all-in-one system **SONY** HW20 mid-range home cinema projector **MONITOR AUDIO** Apex 5.1 sub/sat system **TOSHIBA** 46in LCD TV **APPLE** Second-generation AppleTV **OPPO** Audiophile universal Blu-ray player **AND MORE!**

21:9 revamped



HCC Ratings key

Outstanding	1 2 3 4 **5**
Above average	1 2 3 **4** 5
Acceptable	1 2 **3** 4 5
Disappointing	1 **2** 3 4 5
Dire	**1** 2 3 4 5

Philips has added 3D playback and LED backlighting to its CinemaScope TV. See page 50 for more...

HCC DOESN'T BELIEVE IN OVER-PRAISING HARDWARE. CONSEQUENTLY, A THREE-STAR RATING SHOULDN'T BE CONSIDERED A BAD RESULT – IT SIMPLY MEANS THAT A PRODUCT PERFORMS ACCORDING TO ITS CATEGORY POSITION. A FIVE-STAR RATING IS ONLY AWARDED IN EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

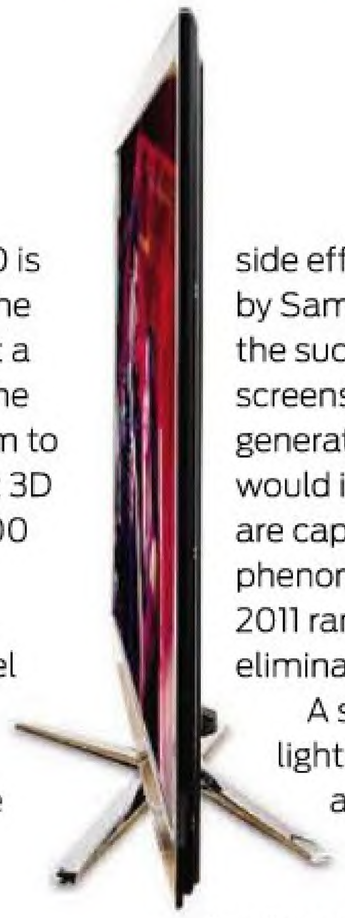
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Panel beater

Samsung has trumped its rivals in the size war by releasing a 65in 3D LED TV. **Mark Craven** gives his eyes a workout



Samsung's UE65C8000 is the latest addition to the brand's 3DTV range. At a gargantuan 65ins, it allows the manufacturer to stake a claim to producing the world's largest 3D LED TV, superseding the 8000 series that peaked at 55ins.

Despite its sheer size, the brushed titanium-effect bezel and 29mm thin profile make its very easy on the eye. As, for the most part, are its images. Standard 2D Blu-ray performance is, at times, jaw-dropping, with excellent contrast levels (measured by our Tech Labs at over 300,000:1), natural bright colours and oodles of fine detail.

Standard-def TV material from the in-built tuner is less impressive, with an expected lack of detail and colour subtlety. However, there's not a lot of compression artefacting on display, and the hi-def Freeview HD channels are markedly better.

Depth charge

Alongside its superior HD performance, **the UE55C8000 is a good 3D display, too. The mammoth size of the TV is perfect for this new format**, where filling your field of vision is vital to achieving the immersive effect that 3D is all about.

A run through of *Monster House* saw sharp images packed with detail, and the brightness of the panel worked to counteract the darkening effect of Samsung's Active Shutter glasses. The result is 3D movies that have more vibrancy than they do even on plasma displays.

The screen's in-built 2D-to-3D conversion software is worth playing with, but only with HD sources.

There are some areas where the UE55C8000 picture quality could be improved, however. One is crosstalk with 3D material: this unwelcome side effect has not been banished by Samsung's engineers, although the success of Philips' new 3D LCD screens, including the second-generation 21:9 (see page 46) would indicate that LCD displays are capable of being cured of the phenomenon. I expect Samsung's 2011 range of 3D screens to eliminate this artefacting.

A second niggle concerns the light pools that are visible around the screen's edges when it's displaying bright, central images on a black background. This is caused by the side-firing LEDs, and can be occasionally distracting.

In terms of audio, the Samsung delivers exactly the kind of sonics I've come to expect from ultra-thin TVs; they all lack bass and real volume for home cinema. It's fine for uncritical telly-watching, though.

Buyers should definitely spend some time in the Samsung's menus once it's out of the box. Firstly, all the UE65C8000's picture presets (Dynamic, Standard, Natural and Movie) come with MotionPlus technology switched on, which film fans will want to rectify. And secondly, the company logo in the bezel is set to glow like a lighthouse, which is far from ideal when you've dimmed all the other lights in your room, so you'll need to switch that off, too. Keen tweakers can also get their hands dirty with the screen's RGB, gamma and white balance controls.

Almost perfect

There's a lot to like about Samsung's biggest screen to date, apart from its dimensions alone. The design is classy, the online portal (Internet@TV) is the best in the business and the performance is very good indeed. But crosstalk and backlighting concerns prevent it from scooping full marks

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



White screen: This monster LED television is quite green. Our white screen test drew 250W – with the Eco-Sensor engaged it dropped to 100W in a dark room



Test footage: With test footage and full audio, the C8000 drops its consumption by 30W

Contrast: ratio



Picture: The C8000 gave an excellent contrast ratio measurement of 315,000:1. It jumps to 419,400:1 in Dynamic mode

Colour temp: Kelvin



Presets: Colour accuracy out of the box wasn't perfect, with all the presets running a little off. It was possible to calibrate it to 6,500K, though
Cool: 10,200K
Normal: 9,300K
Warm 1: 8,800K
Warm 2: 7,455K

HCC VERDICT

Samsung UE65C8000
£5,000

Highs: Superior HD visuals; content-rich connected TV portal; classy-looking ultra-thin design
Lows: Edge LED causes some light pooling; crosstalk with 3D

Performance: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Design: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Features: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5



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→ Specifications

3D: YES Active shutter, with 2D-3D conversion feature
Full HD: YES Tuner: YES Freeview HD
Component video: YES 1 set of inputs HDMI: YES Four v1.4
PC input: YES D-Sub Resolution: 1920 x 1080
Sound: 2 x 15W Brightness (claimed): N/A
Contrast ratio (claimed): 'Mega'
Dimensions (w/o stand): 1,519(w) x 911 (h) x 29.3(d)mm
Weight (w/o stand): 36.2Kg
Features: Internet@TV content portal; DLNA networking; Ethernet; 200MHz Motion Plus; 3D HyperReal engine; Wide Colour Enhancer Plus; SRS TheaterSound; USB PVR function

Samsung's 65in 8000 series TV is both big and beautiful

HOME CINEMA Choice ★★★★ BEST BUY

AV/CV

Product: 65in edge-lit 3DTV

Positioning: Samsung's biggest 3DTV, but not as high-end as the 55in 9000 series

Peers: Panasonic PV-65VT20; Sony KDL-60LX903; Philips Cinema 21:9 Platinum

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Winning formula

Expensive it may be, but **Danny Phillips** thinks this ultra-stylish 7.1-channel all-in-one system is worth saving the pennies for



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AV/CV

Product: 3D-ready all-in-one 7.1. BD system

Positioning: Flagship home cinema system

Peers: LG HX995TZ; Panasonic SC-BTT755; Sony BDV-E870

Say 'all-in-one system' to most AV enthusiasts and they'll recoil in horror. But the HT-C9950W is no ordinary one-box affair, it's what happens when Samsung lets its imagination run wild, blissfully free from price constraints. It's a 7.1-channel, 3D-capable home cinema system that boasts an impossibly generous feature list and, most significantly, an inventive new design.

It's surprising to see the HT-C9950W deviating so dramatically from the company's trusted aesthetic of gloss black. However, the glimmering titanium finish is designed to match Samsung's high-end 3DTVs, and has more in common with the lifestyle systems of Loewe or B&O – and that's some compliment.

The wall-mountable main unit, which houses the Blu-ray player, stands on a long pole stand, and when powered up its black volume dial glides forward. It also doubles as a dot matrix display panel, running through an array of cute animations. Other smart touches include the side-mounted disc slot and pop-up USB port for digital media playback.

Equally impressive is the speaker build quality. One-box system speakers are often hollow and lightweight, but these are more robust, and their exposed drivers and silver finish are pure eye candy.

The unusual nature of the system makes it a little tricky to put together without the manual (as I had to) due to the myriad components that need screwing together. But once assembled it's a wonderfully discreet, clutter-free system; the powered subwoofer houses all the AV connections and hooks up to the player with a single cable, while the speaker wires can be hidden inside the pole stands.

Socket to me

On the back of the sub you'll find three HDMI v1.4 sockets and an Ethernet port for BD-Live and home networking. Surprisingly, the speaker terminals are all binding posts, not spring clips.

Tucked around the back of the BD player is a port specifically for the supplied Wi-Fi USB dongle. This makes it possible to wirelessly stream media from PCs and access Samsung's Internet@TV feature.

The feature list doesn't stop there. Also in the box is a transmitter card and receiver box for wireless rear speakers, which would have been the ultimate in cable-free convenience had the surround back channels been afforded the same treatment. As it stands, you'll still have a pair of wires to conceal.

Elsewhere there's an iPod/iPhone dock in the box, Dolby Pro Logic IIz processing, several weird DSP modes and automatic audio calibration.

The system is easy to operate thanks to the delightful onscreen menus and backlit remote. It also loads most Blu-ray discs quickly, although *Terminator Salvation* took over a minute.

Layer cake

Three-dimensional picture quality is excellent, issues with crosstalk on certain 3DTVs notwithstanding. *Monsters Vs Aliens*' image composition is spot-on, with crisply rendered objects in the foreground and superbly layered backgrounds. The pictures are vibrant and razor-sharp, even through tinted glasses. Non-3D pictures also scrub up nicely, although the Silicon Optix HQV disc reveals one or two chinks in the armour.

Its greater achievement is in sound quality. The HT-C9950W **manages to sidestep the problems of Samsung's cheaper all-in-one systems to deliver a more mature, refined sound**.

It's a genuinely powerful beast. With *Iron Man 2*'s Monaco Grand Prix fight sequence, The F1 cars roar round the soundstage with real gusto, and when the sliced-up chassis crash to the floor, the noise is crisp and bracing but rarely jarring on the ears. Only the sharpest sounds at loud volumes give the speakers anything to worry about.

In fact, there's some excellent high-frequency handling at play throughout the film. Inside Tony's lab, the HT-C9950W easily teases out background ambience and subtle electronic effects, giving the overall sound more intimacy than I expected.

Another factor behind the system's success is the decent powered subwoofer, which adds tight, punchy bottom-end without the overpowering resonance you get from many passive bass bins. It chalks up further Brownie points with crystal clear dialogue, smooth effect steering and tight integration between the sub and sats.

Combine this impressive sound quality with its other attributes and you get a stunning one-box cinema system that justifies its lofty price tag

Silver service: Samsung's HT-C9950W has been designed to match its high-end flatscreen TVs

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts

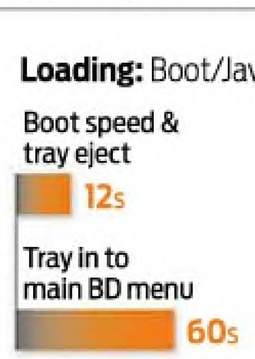


Idling: An average energy consumption for an all-in-one system



Playing: With test footage, the system draws an average of 75W

Loading: Boot/Java



Disc loading & Java: Not as fast as a standard BD deck in both booting/loading

→ Specifications

3D playback: YES
Video upscaling: YES Up to 1080p
Multiregion: NO BD Region B, DVD Region 2
HDMI: YES 1 output, 2 inputs. All v1.4
Component video: NO
Multichannel phono audio: NO Stereo inputs only
Stereo phono audio: YES 1 x in
Digital audio: YES 1 x optical
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD decoding: YES/YES
Dolby True HD/DTS-HD bitstream: YES/YES
Profile 2.0: YES with built-in memory
Total Amplification (Claimed): 1,000W
Dimension (main unit): 490(w) x 163.5(h) x 29(d)mm
Weight (main unit): 2.26kg
Features: 3D Ready; AllShare DLNA media streaming; Internet@TV; supplied wi-fi USB dongle, iPod dock and transmitter kit for rear speakers; Dolby Pro Logic IIz; Smart Sound, MP3 Enhance, Power Bass; Ethernet port; 1080p DVD upscaling; 3 x USB; 240W subwoofer; FM tuner; auto calibration; DivX HD, WMV HD, MKV, MP3, WMA, JPEG playback



HCC VERDICT

Samsung HT-C9950W
£2,000 Approx

Highs: Abundant features; classy esoteric design; sound and picture performance

Lows: Can get better sound from separates at this price; tricky to assemble

Picture: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Design: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Features: 1 2 3 4 **5**

Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

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A bit of a stretch

Philips takes John Archer's home cinema tastes to breaking point – in a good way – with its latest 21:9-ratio TV

Just as *Spinal Tap*'s amps go to 11, then Philips' 58PFL9955H goes to 21. Or 21:9, to be precise.

This is the much-anticipated sequel to the brand's original, ground-breaking and seriously movie-friendly Cinema 21:9 – a TV which laughed in the piffling face of your usual 16:9-ratio TVs and stretched to embrace the extra girth of the ultra-wide CinemaScope aspect ratio still used on the majority of cinematically released films.

Or to put it in more prosaic terms, it's a really wide telly that can show even 2.35:1 CinemaScope films without those bloody annoying black bars to top and bottom. Huzzah!

What's more, its ultra-wide shape is really just one among a whole host of attractions of the 58PFL9955H. For starters, the set is 2in bigger than the original 21:9. This doesn't sound much, but it actually looks like more, such is the dominating impact the screen has on your field of view.

The set's new design is a definite improvement, too, eschewing the slightly plasticky finish of the original model with a much more opulent and 'touchable' brushed >



HOME CINEMA Choice Reference Status

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Bigger, smarter and 3D – this Philips is like Christmas every day of the year

→ Specifications

3D: *YES* Active shutter with two sets of glasses supplied
HD Ready: *YES* including 1080p/24
Tuner: *YES* Freeview (not HD)
Component video: *YES* one input
HDMI: *YES* four, including v1.4 option
PC input: *YES* one D-Sub
Resolution: 2,560 x 1,080
Sound: 30W RMS
Brightness (claimed): 500cd/m2
Contrast ratio (claimed): 10,000,000:1

Dimensions (off stand): 1,459(w) x 668(H) x 71(d)mm
Weight: 26kg
Features: 400Hz; NetTV online service; USB media playback; direct LED lighting with local dimming; Perfect Pixel HD processing; DLNA support; Wi-Fi built in; MP3, WMA, AAC, JPEG, H264/MPEG-4 AVC, MPEG-1, MPEG-2, MPEG-4, WMV9/VC1, AVI, MKV media support

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aluminium bezel. Even more flair comes from the inevitable implementation of Philips' Ambilight system, which pumps out coloured light sympathetic to the image content.

Some people might find Ambilight a bit much, I guess, and as we'll see, its effectiveness with 3D material is debatable. But if you don't like it, then hey – you can always turn it off.

Yes, that's right, I did say 3D back there. The 58PFL9955H is **the first TV to bring the new full HD 3D system to an ultra-wide screen** – a prospect that's got us pretty excited given that 3D depends on creating a sense of immersion to work well. It's good to note that you get two pairs of active shutter glasses free when you buy the TV, and the IR emitter is integrated into the TV's bezel.

You don't get a 2D-3D conversion system, however. But while some members of the *HCC* team will disagree with me, I actually consider this a positive rather than a negative, given how prone to unpleasantness such converters tend to be.

No dead zones

For serious picture quality fans, the 58PFL9955H's most important feature might well be its use of a direct (rear-mounted) LED lighting system, complete with local dimming, and with around 30 per cent more controllable LED segments than the 224 found inside Philips' excellent 16:9-ratio PFL9705 models.

This immediately allays fears of potential 'dead zones' that might have occurred if Philips had just put more space between the 224 LED segments, and leaves the set claiming the same 10,000,000:1 contrast ratio as its 16:9 siblings.

The direct LED engine is driven by the very latest version of Philips' Perfect Pixel HD video processor: a system with so much horsepower it makes the processing efforts of many rivals look like they're running on a ZX Spectrum.

The downside to all this processing might is that it needs effort to get the best out of it. Nearly every part of the processing engine can be manipulated individually. This is great on one level, but does require experimentation so that you become used to what the different settings for all the options do with different source types.

The last big trick up the 58PFL9955H's big old sleeves is its multimedia support. This runs to playback of a vast wealth of video/photo/music multimedia formats from USB devices or DLNA PCs; the ability to reproduce and manipulate your PC's screen interface on the TV; and a solid online service that includes open internet browsing.

The only common feature the 55PFL9955H lacks is an integrated Freeview HD receiver. But then a set of this stature will likely be used with an external HD tuner, most likely a Sky HD or Virgin HD box. Especially given the 3D material these boxes can also provide.

Unable to resist, I kicked off my testing of the 58PFL9955H's ultrawide pictures with some 3D content – namely *Call of Duty: Black Ops* in 3D, and a clip of *Avatar*. And in many ways, the experience was hugely enjoyable.

For a start, the sheer width of the screen has a startling beneficial impact on 3D's immersive properties. It just seems to fit that much more comfortably into your natural field of vision than normal 16:9 TVs. Also extremely striking is how bright, colourful and detailed 3D HD sources look, as the set manages a level of dynamism with 3D that none of our preferred 3D plasma TVs can match.

On one level the TV even does well with 3D's crosstalk noise interference, toning it down compared with any other LCD TV – bar Philips' own 46PFL9705H. The crosstalk is there, but it looks fainter and thus less distracting.

However, while the 58PFL9955H suppresses crosstalk very well by LCD standards, it still leaves more of it on show than you get with 3D plasma TVs, especially those from Panasonic.

I also didn't like Ambilight with 3D material. It just didn't look natural – possibly because it's essentially a 2D device being applied to a 3D image.

Turning to the 55PFL9955H's 2D pictures – provided you are conservative regarding contrast and brightness levels, and have set the processing options to sensible levels – they're a wonder to behold.



The 21:9 aspect ratio is perfect for widescreen movies – maybe not for *Only Fools and Horses*

AV/CV

Product: A 58in direct LED 3DTV built to a 21:9 'cinemascope' ratio

Positioning: Philips' flagship TV, above the 16:9-format 9705 Series

Peers: Samsung UE55C8000; Sony KDL-60LX903; Panasonic TX-P65VT20

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Touch me: The brushed aluminium finish makes the 21:9 more strokeable than ever

Again the sheer size and width of the picture when watching a Blu-ray CinemaScope film makes a massive instant impact. It's difficult to overestimate just how good it is not to have those unnatural black bars to the top and bottom of the picture. But the 58PFL9955H is also sensational in the colour and contrast departments, as fantastically exuberant colours and punchy whites sit side by side with inky black levels that are a revelation for an LCD screen. There isn't even any sign of the sort of 'haloing' issue that we usually associate with very dynamic direct LED TVs unless you have to watch from an angle.

Colours also look natural despite their dynamism, and sharpness and detail levels with HD footage are extreme even without the set's rather noise-inducing Advanced Sharpness tool in play.

So potent is the Philips' video processing, meanwhile, that it makes standard definition pictures look sharp, colourful and – if your processing settings are right – noiseless.

Even LCD's age-old issue of motion blur is but a tiny irritant on the 58PFL9955H. In fact, the set's HD Natural Motion system can almost completely eradicate it, as well as judder. This system won't be to everyone's tastes, and it certainly must be handled with care, but it's still a worthy addition to the picture toolset.

In fact, aside from again having to stress that it takes effort to get the best out of them, I am struggling to find anything negative to say about the 55PFL9955H's pictures. It remains a shame, I guess, that nobody is yet making native 2.35:1 Blu-ray transfers; instead the black bars around CinemaScope films continue to be added during mastering, meaning the 55PFL9955H has to use processing to 'expand' pictures and push the bars off the screen. But this processing is so good you'll forget it's even going on.

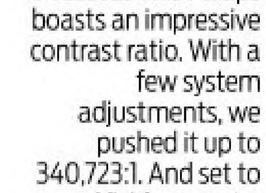
Big sound for a thin TV

The set doesn't just focus on picture quality either. A clever system of separated dome tweeters and rear-mounted woofers helps produce levels of audio power, range and clarity that most other thin TVs can only dream about.

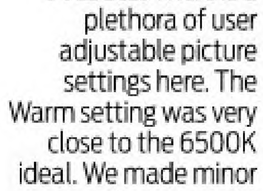
I guess the 55PFL9955H's £4,000 asking price could get you a decent projector, screen and even, at a push, a cheap anamorphic lens attachment. But projectors simply don't suit every room environment, and in any case, no affordable projector even gets close to the intensity, dynamism, believability and uniquely engaging experience of watching the 55PFL9955H. Basically, despite its complexity and lack of Freeview HD tuner, this Philips TV is nothing short of a home cinema triumph ●

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



White screen: Compared to plasma screen of similar size, the Philips is very eco-friendly



Test footage: We measured a slight decrease in energy consumption during our standard test footage

TV Contrast: Ratio



Picture: This Philips boasts an impressive contrast ratio. With a few system adjustments, we pushed it up to 340,723:1. And set to Vivid, you get a dynamic contrast ratio of 407,780:1.

Colour accuracy



Presets: There is a plethora of user adjustable picture settings here. The Warm setting was very close to the 6500K ideal. We made minor adjustments to achieve 6500K
Normal: 8671K
Warm: 6321K
Cool: 10267K



HCC VERDICT

Philips 58PFL9955H
£4,000 Approx

Highs: Design; 2D/3D pictures; excellent multimedia talents; internet browsing; image processing
Lows: Off-axis viewing; no Freeview HD tuner; no 2D-3D conversion

Performance: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Design: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Features: 1 2 3 **4** 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 **5**

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Muscular appeal

Denon's upgrade to its esteemed 2310 model is a great performer, but its lack of networking won't impress today's AVR buyer, says **Richard Stevenson**



Middle child: The AVR-2311 sits snugly within the company's seven model line up

Coming to the ring in its all-black livery is Denon's latest middleweight contender, the AVR-2311. The latest in a long line of Denon champions, this model is more an evolution of the heavy-hitting 2310 than a revolution in its own right. That said, the predecessor had a lot going for it, including a fast-paced and exciting sound, plus a feature list that had much of the competition whimpering in their respective corners.

At the heart of the AVR-2311 you get the same core processing chipset and power-house amplification offering a very respectable 135W into 6Ω, on paper at least. It is fully kitted out with the latest HD audio decoding, and promises 1080p images from almost any source. The changes, tweaks and upgrades of last year's model are subtle, but bring the design more up to date.

The HDMI in and outs are now v1.4a specification, although the choice of six inputs and a single output on the 2311 would have been better configured five/two in my opinion. They offer Audio Return Channel from your TV should you want to amplify Jeremy Kyle in the morning and are 3DTV compatible for switching. The new video scaling engine is based around Anchor Bay's fourth-generation chipset with its proprietary Precision Deinterlacing and its five-field motion-adaptive processing. It's not ABT's top-spec chipset, but it certainly packs in most of the good stuff.

The back panel is comprehensively equipped making the 2311 a natural step up from the rather frugal 1911 for those with plenty of sources. The multichannel output suite is equipped with twin sub outputs and, with Dolby

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The AVR-2311 has evolved from last year's AVR-2310 with 3D and HDMI tweaks

AV/CV

Product: Middle market seven-channel AV receiver

Positioning: In the middle of Denon's seven-strong AVR range

Peers: Onkyo TX-NR708; Pioneer VSX-1020; Yamaha RX-V767

Pro-Logic IIz on board, there is a spare set of speaker terminals for front height channels. It is a 7-channel amplifier, however, so you have to choose between rear-back or height speakers – a subject that invariably starts a bun fight in the *HCC* office.

Four go missing

On the missing list are four important connections, however. The first is that the MM phono input has gone from the previous model, which is no big thing. More seriously, there are no multichannel inputs for those of us who still own multichannel SACD players; there's only a single USB terminal on the front panel and not hide nor hair of an Ethernet connection. On a machine costing this much, I would have thought the latter was damn near mandatory these days, not only for internet radio, streaming, and NAS-based media, but also for firmware updates.

In a comeback that would have George Foreman nodding sympathetically, though, the front USB input can be connected to an iPod or iPhone digitally. Most docks or USB-based Apple connectors allow the phone or player to convert the digital files to analogue music (through arguably the worst DACs in the world – thanks Apple) before going to your amp.

The AVR2311 interrogates the inner working of the device and streams a PCM digital signal from the device to its onboard decoders. Load up your iPod with high-bitrate or lossless music and you've got yourself a very fine high-end music server.

Cosmetically, the AVR-2311 is about a six out of 10. Not ugly but quite plain and, like many sixes, looks a whole lot better after a bottle of Rioja. I was no great fan of the last generation's flip-over remote control either, with its buttons on both sides, so I welcome the return of a single-sided remote. Interestingly, the device's bottom two buttons are labelled Party and Sleep. Now that is my sort of gadget.

Stuck in the middle

Powered up, the Denon's GUI also scores about six out of 10. It is much advanced from some of the old black text menu systems, but equally it falls shy of the beauty of the brand's full phat picture GUIs. It comprises menus with some colour and a couple of line drawings, basically. >

→ Specifications

Dolby TrueHD: *YES* and Dolby Pro-Logic IIz
DTS-HD Master Audio: *YES* and DTS ES 6.1 Discrete
THX: *NO*
Multichannel input: *NO*
Multichannel output: *YES* 7.2 phono
Multiroom: *YES* main + 1 zone
AV inputs: *YES* 5 x S-video and phono audio
HDMI: *YES* 6-in 1-out, v1.4
Video upscaling: *YES* to 1080p
Component video: *YES* 2-in, 1-out
Amplification: 7 x 135W claimed
Dimensions: 434(w) x 381(d) x 171(h)mm
Weight: 11.2kg
Also featuring: Dolby Pro-Logic IIz; Height channel output terminals; video picture adjustments; video noise reduction; PCM input from iPod; HDMI v1.4a; twin subwoofer outputs; iPod/phone control app on the way; FM/AM tuner; Audyssey MultEQ RoomEQ and auto setup with supplied mic; WMA, MP3, FLAC and WAV file playback from USB

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Give and take: Twin sub outputs and spare speakers terminals partly make up for the lack of multichannel inputs and Ethernet connection

However, it is easy enough to navigate without referring to the manual and it offers Audyssey auto-set up with a mic supplied. The end of the setup asks you if you want to default to Audyssey Dynamic Volume and/or Dynamic EQ before saving the setup, then away you go.

The Audyssey MultEQ room EQ system defaults to 'on' and did a reasonable job of balancing my room on the first run. While experimenting with a full-range speaker system with no subs during this test, I dived into the manual EQ settings. I was pleasantly surprised to find you could copy over the measured Audyssey curves and then tweak each band on each channel from that point: very useful and very flexible indeed. Likewise, I take my hat off to Denon for including a reasonably comprehensive video adjust menu, if you want to add a little more punch to your picture.

Sound quality is another area upgraded over the old 2310, and *HCC* got an inside track on the fact that this model was tuned and benchmarked by a pair of UK born and bred ears. In fact, said ears explained some of the finer points of the new model over lunch when the review sample arrived.

And it doesn't take long to hear the differences: the opening sequence of *Star Trek* (2009) blistered into the room with speed and detail aplenty. A heady mix of big bass effects and upper frequencies with real sparkle make the 2311 an amp that wows from the outset.

Spectacular delivery

As Captain George Kirk (Snr) ploughs the *USS Kelvin* into Nero's fearsome mining ship, while his wife gives birth in an escape shuttle, the Denon doesn't hold back in delivering both the action and the emotion of the scene. It is a full-on thrill ride charged with poignancy and, as the ships collide and the scene cuts to a view from space, the silence is crushing. The effect was only a little dampened by a fairly obvious digital 'clicking' sound through the speakers as you raise and lower the volume. This was a feature of some of the earliest AVRs to implement DSP-based digital volume controls. I am surprised Denon let this one slip through, although once you have set the volume for film watching you are not going to hear it, of course.

The dialogue through *Star Trek* is quite intense, particularly some of the scenes in the Vulcan academy with its ambient, lofty halls. The Denon crafts the open space with plenty of scale and a good sense of height even in 5.1 mode. Footsteps echo on hard floors with a realistic tone and small details such as rustling clothes are delivered in detail. When Spock's father walks down the corridor and sits beside his young son in detention after a fight, you can feel every bit of the cool atmosphere. If anything, the AVR-2311 sounds just a little too clinical with this fine detailing, etching them in the room to perfection, yet falling just a little shy of the natural smoothness required to make them truly believable.

Despite that, it certainly steps up the sonic pace from its predecessor and is a frisky performer that will thrill with big blockbuster action movies. Its articulate balance is more detailed and energetic than the bigger, weightier sound of Denons of old, but I am not sure I wholly dig the shift, personally. Add to this the, frankly, odd lack of networking features, and I find the AVR-2311 a little wanting despite it being a better overall machine than the much-loved, old AVR-2310. I'm confused

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts

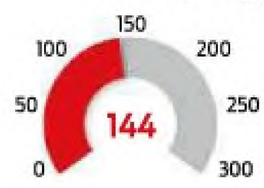


Idling: The 2311 uses 73W when it's ticking over – which may be more than your TV

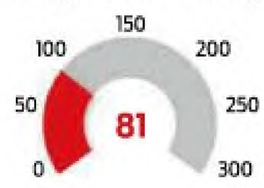


Powered: With volume at -20dB, power consumption averaged 185W during our test footage, with a maximum of 286W

Power ratings: Watts (8Ω, 0.5% THD)

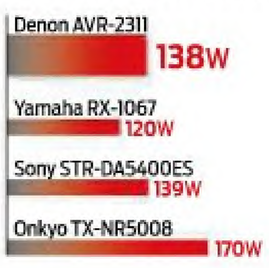


2-channel 8Ω: In stereo, this Denon has a lot of power at its disposal



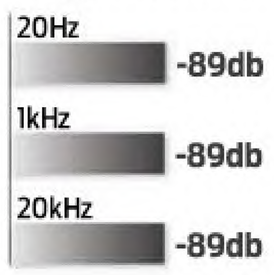
5-channel 8Ω: Does not quite match Denon's 8Ω figure of 105W, but surround sound power was commendable from a receiver at this price

Untainted: Watts



Fidelity firewall: Running two channels, the AVR-2311 was capable of producing a 138W at 0.05% THD

Signal/noise: dB



S/N tests: Exceeds the THX signal-to-noise ratio standard of -85dB for the entire frequency spectrum



HCC VERDICT

Denon AVR-2311
£800 Approx

Highs: Articulate, fast-paced sound; digital iPod/iPad connection
Lows: Lack of networking; sound could be smoother; no multichannel inputs

Performance: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Design: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Features: 1 2 **3** 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

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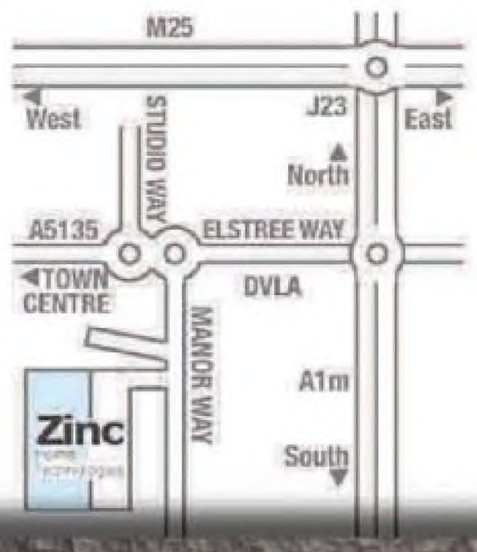
Samsung	UE55C7000	**£1945.00**
Samsung	UE40C7000	**£1075.00**
Philips	40PFL8605	**£1125.00**
Sony	KDL40NX803 *	**£1100.70**
Sony	KDL40EX713 *	**£675.75**

Denon	AVR1611	**£345.00**
Denon	AVR1911	**£365.00**
Denon	AVR2311	**£615.00**
Marantz	SR6005	**£745.00**
Marantz	SR7005	**£1225.00**

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The RX-V1067 is built to last and peppered with HDMI ports

An amp for life?

Jim Hill finally finds a future-proofed AV receiver with the right number of HDMI inputs to suit high-end cinema and music needs

I'm weary of annually having to upgrade my AV receiver each time the HDMI standard changes, and gaining one more HDMI input with each new model. Why don't the manufacturers understand that all AV sources use HDMI and, at this end of the market, accept we're likely to need more than four?

But I have now found an AV receiver that actually has more digital than analogue inputs and enough HDMI ports for all my components, including two more that can work at the same time. So with 3D video switching and audio return catered for, Yamaha's RX-V1067 does seem quite well futureproofed.

It also has support for nine speakers and pre-outs for two subwoofers, giving you plenty of setup options. You can either bi-amp the fronts in a 7.1 system, or add a pair of front 'presence' speakers for a more cohesive sound using Yamaha's many Cinema DSP modes. Note there are only seven 105W amplifiers on board, so you'll need to add a stereo amp for the other two.

Battleship build

The unit itself is huge and heavy, like all the best AV receivers, with a rigid chassis and newly developed heat sink that also absorbs vibration. Inside, the symmetrical power amp layout keeps the signal path as simple as possible and there's also a Pure Direct button for cutting out the video signal for hi-fi listening.

The crisp and glossy fascia houses a large LCD display with the lower half finished in more traditional brushed aluminium. Huge volume and source select dials flank the oil-damped, drop-down flap that conceals the rest of the controls and front AV inputs. This is where the eighth HDMI input lurks.

Connectivity at the back is superb. It's heartening to see that composite video inputs have finally given way to HDMI ports. The Ethernet port allows networking with other DLNA devices

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→ Specifications

Dolby Digital True HD: *YES* and Dolby Digital Plus
DTS HD Master Audio: *YES* and DTS Neo 6, DTS ES discrete etc
THX: *NO* Not certified by THX
Multichannel audio: *YES* 7 x 105W amplifiers plus 2 passive
Multichannel input: *YES* 7.1 channel analogue inputs
Multiroom: *YES* Zone 2
AV inputs: *YES* 4 x S-video, 7 x digital audio (4 x optical, 3 x coaxial
HDMI input/output: *YES* 8-in, 2-out HDMI v1.4a switching
Video upscaling: *YES* analogue and HDMI scaling to 1080p
Component input/output: *YES* 4-in, 1-out
Dimensions: 435 (w) x 430 (d) x 182(h)mm
Weight: 14.7kg
Also featuring: 3D video switching; 9-channel surround sound using front 'presence' speakers; YPAO mic for auto calibration; Cinema DSP sound effects; 7.2 pre-outputs; USB reader; phono input stage; works with Yamaha's optional iPod dock; Ethernet for DLNA

and give you access to thousands of web-based radio stations.

Yamaha has also supplied zippy onscreen graphics that now make setting up and controlling this sophisticated beast very easy indeed. The excellent YPAO auto calibration system is a godsend, too. Just plug the mic in and it'll generate all of the sound effects needed to set the speaker levels for you. You're free to go back and fine tune if you wish.

In plain Dolby Digital mode, this amp has instant appeal. It packs enough power to make my six M&K speakers sing and the steering of effects between them feels effortless. Using *Wolfman* on Blu-ray as a test disc, the Yamaha receiver **sounds exceptionally dynamic, placing sound in all corners of the room** and building seamlessly from rustling leaves in a midnight forest to roaring and screaming with no uncomfortable jarring at the top-end.

The balance feels lean and open with plenty of accurate treble clarity, but there's enough low-end information to give a neutral overall sound.

The big advantage here is the speaker flexibility. I preferred to have the Yamaha switched into 7.1 mode, but using a single surround back speaker, for movie listening. However, wiring two additional speakers above and to the sides of the front pair and choosing the 'presence' mode has the effect of spreading the sound wider and higher, which can really enhance music. This is the 3D soundstage, to which removable stickers on the front of the unit cryptically elude.

The best option then is to add a stereo amplifier and drive all nine speakers at the same time. I was able to achieve a very convincing 9.2 home cinema from this reasonably priced receiver. And with all of the speakers in place, you can make the most of Yamaha's numerous DSP modes, which are all sorted into Music and Movie categories.

Sonically, the Yamaha is a big success and its feature set is commendable. Yes, the lack of Wi-Fi networking is annoying, and the handset is a bit basic, but it should be able to hold its own at this price point. In fact, thanks to its futureproofed connectivity and 3D capability, it could be the last AV receiver you'll have to buy for a few years at least

AV/CV

Product: AV receiver

Position: Upper end model for sophisticated home cinemas

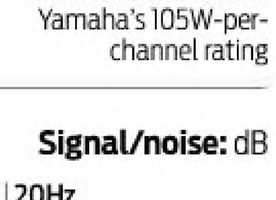
Peers: Onkyo TX-NR808; Pioneer VSX-2020

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts

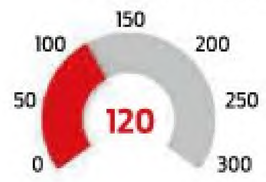


Idling: Best not to leave this AVR ticking over when not in use

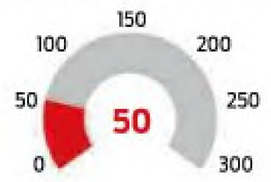


Powered: During test footage at -20dB, the Yamaha used an average 205W, peaking at 320W

Power ratings: Watts (8Ω , 0.1% THD)

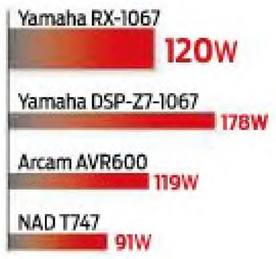


2-channel 8Ω: In stereo mode at 8Ω, the RX-V1067 delivers a commendable 120W per channel



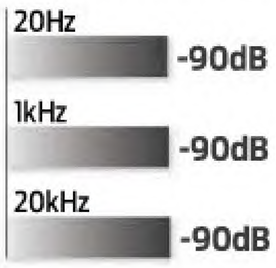
5-channel 8Ω: A five-channel measurement of 50W is somewhat below Yamaha's 105W-per-channel rating

Untainted: Watts



Fidelity firewall: Fidelity firewall is a measurement of power achieved before distortion becomes unacceptable. Our 120W figure was recorded with 0.01% THD

Signal/noise: dB



S/N tests: Good figures across the range, and exceeding the THX standard of -85dB



HCC VERDICT

Yamaha RX-V1067
£850 Approx

Highs: Excellent connectivity; 3D video switching; YPAO auto setup; cinematic surround sound
Lows: No Wi-Fi; basic remote control

Performance: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Design: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Features: 1 2 3 **4** 5

Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

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Apex has the pecs

Danny Philips is bowled over by the sheer power afforded by this compact system. But then, at this price, you'd expect it



AV/CV

Product: Luxury compact 5.1 speaker package

Position: Monitor Audio's top-end compact system

Peers: B&W MT-30; AE Pro Sub-Sat; Klipsch Icon

HOME CINEMA Choice ★★★★★ BEST BUY

Flex those 'pex: the system combines precision engineering with good looks

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Most people wouldn't expect to pay over £2K for a compact speaker system, but then Monitor Audio's Apex is anything but average. It's a slice of pure audio luxury, with each speaker housed in a precision-engineered enclosure and furnished with some of the best driver tech MA has to offer.

The system on test here includes four A10 speakers, which handle front and rear-channel duties and stand just 250mm high. They retail for £275 each, and that's before you've even added the bespoke stands at £250 per pair. They're joined by the A40 centre and AW12 subwoofer, £425 and £900 respectively.

Pricey they may be, but they're worth it. Build quality is brilliant. The inert die-cast aluminium enclosures are robust and weighty, while the use of a metallic black lacquer finish, brush effect metal side trims and curved cabinets epitomise cutting-edge chic. Magnetic grilles leave no visible fixings – the icing on an already sumptuous cake.

Inside the A10s a 1in C-CAM gold dome tweeter handles high frequencies up to and beyond 35kHz. Like the Silver RX range, the drivers are attached to the enclosure using a single through bolt fixing, which eliminates a possible source of distortion and acts as a brace to resist unwanted vibration.

There's more clever tech inside the floor stands. Plonk the A10s on top and there's no need to connect up the cables as they're internally wired with built-in connecting forks.

The A40 centre features the same technology and mind-boggling build quality as the A10s, but adds an extra mid/bass driver – the two flank the gold-dome tweeter in the middle. The A40 can be mounted on the tabletop using the supplied feet or on the wall with the attached brackets. Once in position it can be tilted up to 22.5º to suit the angle and position of your screen.

The B. A. Baracus of this particular A-Team is the AW12 subwoofer, supplying a considerable 500W of muscle from its 12in long-throw C-CAM driver. Exclusive to the Apex system, this bass-monger is every bit as classy as the speakers, thanks to the spangled black lacquer finish and gorgeous metal side trims, but be warned – it's a lot heavier than its compact dimensions might suggest.

The sub's volume and EQ controls are helpfully located on top – a godsend if it's tucked in a hard-to-reach spot. There's a couple of buttons for two different EQ modes – the standard EQ1 setting offers the best overall balance for music and movies, while the movie-centric EQ 2 mode boosts output by an extra 4dB at 21Hz for added punch. On the back is a crossover dial, which goes from 40Hz up to 120Hz, but the low-pass filter switch will bypass this if you'd rather control it with your receiver. Phase control and line in/out sockets complete the lineup.

In action

The Apex offers a masterful performance with movie material. Right across the soundstage there's an astonishing amount of detail, unearthing sonic minutiae you might not have noticed before – even with movies you know like the back of your hand.

I've seen *The Dark Knight*'s monumental Batpod chase scene countless times, but this system suddenly had me noticing subtle noises and nuances in the surround design that slip under the radar on lesser compact systems. Engines sound extra raspy, while weapons load and fire with extra snap, crackle and pop. This level of insight and dexterity isn't entirely surprising at over £2K, but that doesn't make the Apex's talents any less incredible.

It's also astonishingly powerful. I was expecting fireworks, but what I got was Bonfire Night and Bastille Day rolled into one. **Herculean doesn't even begin to describe the low-end might afforded by the AW-12** – it's thick, punchy and tighter than a public sector budget. If you can remain seated when The Joker blasts his bazooka you're probably dead, but even when you decommission the sub there's still a healthy dose of bass in the mix thanks to the terrific bottom-end extension of the A10s and A40.

What's more, high-frequencies are smooth as silk, speech couldn't be clearer if the actors were in the room and the rear soundstage is willfully expansive. And with music, this system nailed the emotion and energy of any recording I threw at it. Clean, full-bodied vocals, metronomic timing and wonderful detail reproduction make for a spine-tingling listen and reveal it to be a fantastic all-rounder.

These speakers may be small, but their sound certainly isn't; if you have this sort of money to spend, you'll be hard pressed to find a better compact system

→ Specifications

A10 Fronts/Rears

Drive units: 1 x 5.5in RST mid/bass driver, 1 x 1in C-CAM gold dome tweeter
Enclosure: Front ported bass reflex with HiVe II port system
Frequency Response: 60Hz-35kHz
Power handling: 100W
Dimensions: 140(w) x 250(h) x 140(d)mm
Weight: 3.95kg

A40 Centre

Drive units: 2 x 5.5in C-CAM mid/bass drivers with RST technology, 1 x 1in C-CAM gold dome tweeter
Enclosure: Bass reflex with twin front-mounted Dual HiVe II ports
Frequency Response: 50Hz-35kHz
Power handling: 200W
Dimensions: 140(w) x 610(h) x 100(d)mm
Weight: 6.85kg

AW-12 subwoofer

Drive units: 1 x 12in C-CAM subwoofer driver with triple suspension and 3in long-throw voice coil
Enclosure: Sealed cabinet
Frequency Response: Lower limit - 27Hz (EQ 1), 21Hz (EQ 2) – upper limit – 40Hz-120Hz variable
On board power: 500W RMS from Class D digital amplifier
Dimensions: 340(w) x 340(h) x 410(d)mm
Weight: 22.56kg
Connections: Phono stereo input and output



HCC VERDICT

Monitor Audio Apex
£2,425 Approx

Highs: Intricately detailed, articulate and powerful sound; supermodel looks; astonishing build quality
Lows: Expensive by normal compact system standards

Performance: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Design: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Features: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Overall: 1 2 3 4 **5**

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PANASONIC TX-P42VT20B → £1,800 Approx → www.panasonic.co.uk

→ Specifications

3D: *YES* Full HD: *YES* 1080p/24
Tuner: *YES* Freeview HD, Freesat HD, CI slot Component video: *YES* 1
HDMI: *YES* v1.4 x 4 (1 side, 3 rear); 1 Audio Return Channel
PC input: *YES* 1 Mini D-Sub 15-pin
Resolution: 1,920 x 1,080
Sound: 3 x 10W, 2.1-ch
Brightness (claimed): N/A
Contrast ratio (claimed): 5,000,000:1 Native
Dimensions (w/o stand): 1,035(w) x 656(h) x 85(d)mm
Weight (w/o stand): 21.0kg

Features: NeoPDP; Ethernet connection; supplied Wireless LAN adapter; DLNA certified; VieraLink; CATS; 600Hz Sub Field Drive Intelligent Frame Creation Pro; Viera Image Viewer SD card slot; dual USB (Flash memory/keyboard/wi-fi/USB HDD Recording/HUB); 2 sets of 3D glasses; 0.001 msec response time; Deep Colour (10/12-bit); x.v. Colour; THX mode; V-Audio ProSurround; Digital optical audio output; 2 x Scart; headphone jack; HDMI CEC; VieraCast internet video



AV/CV

Product: 42in Neo PDP TV with 3D playback
Positioning: Panasonic's smallest 3DTV
Peers: Sony KDL-40HX803; Samsung UE40C8000; LG 42LX6900

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Full of promise

Adrian Justins takes in all that this 3D-enabled plasma has to offer, but thinks there's still room for improvement



The TX-P42VT20 is by no means the slimmest or most stylish TV on the market, but it makes up for that in the features department. Dual Freeview HD and Freesat HD tuners; 3D compatibility; VieraCast internet video services; USB video recording; wireless networking and other multimedia skills headline its extensive spec sheet.

Equally (if not more) important to anyone thinking of spending a significant slice of money on this NeoPDP panel are the picture processing tricks used to eke out every last bit of visual goodness, including Panasonic's Infinite Black Pro contrast and a THX movie mode.

Connections wise, the TX-P42VT20 wants for nothing, with just about every contemporary and legacy port catered for, including an audio return channel-equipped HDMI for minimising the number of cables needed in a AV setup. The provision of a wireless adapter makes establishing a network a far simpler task, by reducing the number of cable runs, and because this screen automatically makes friends with your networked devices, including in my case, a BT Home Hub, an Apple Mac and a Windows 7 server. Sadly, the wi-fi dongle projects from the frame and spoils the set's clean lines.

Audio reproduction, ever the weakest link, is boosted marginally by a built-in 10W sub that complements the usual pair of 10W stereo speakers.

As we're becoming weary of saying, Panasonic's menu system is in dire need of a makeover. It looks drab and some functions are illogically buried in subfolders, including the 3D settings, so that switching from 2D requires several button presses to find the right 3D mode (plus, you'll want to engage the set's dynamic picture mode to boost the brightness).

Despite all the hype surrounding 3D, the extra dimension still isn't the huge draw for TV watching that it has become in the cinema. So 2D remains the most important aspect, and Smart TV functions could well become more significant than 3D. Here, Panasonic's VieraCast internet video service is more basic than some and lacks the BBC iPlayer. You get access to a small selection of content and for Skype users, the built-in app could be handy.

On the plus side, there is no shortage of detail and clarity with broadcast HD sources, with the panels at the side and bottom of the Sky News HD screen showing superb levels of detail. Colour fidelity is also excellent and black levels are worthy of a Pioneer Kuro.

Avatar on Blu-ray (2D) is absolutely knock-out in terms of its overall impact and natural colour fidelity, but the screen doesn't match, say, Samsung's 8000 series LCD for detail, especially in darker areas.

The screen's biggest issue, though, is dealing with movement. Camera pans and fast-moving objects can be quite juddery (but never disastrously) and engaging Intelligent Frame Creation helps, but it makes movies seem like camcorder-sourced video and can cause haloing. It switches off automatically during 3D playback and when watching Blu-rays in 1080p/24 mode.

There's a pretty good argument that says 42in is too small a screen for 3D where the effect makes objects seem small. With that in mind, I'd recommend stepping up to Panasonic's 50in VT20 model if that's what you're interested in. Otherwise, this can be considered a very good HDTV

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



White screen: Not as efficient as its LCD counterparts. With Power Save engaged this figure drops to 275W



Test footage: Our live footage test showed a considerable drop in consumption, making this Panasonic equivalent to many LCDs

Contrast: ratio



Picture: These are superb real world figures, although plasma still can't match the contrast highs of LED-based displays

Colour temp: Kelvin



This Panasonic allows the user to easily adjust the picture quality. We had little trouble tweaking it to achieve 6,500K
Cool: 10,600K
Normal: 6,900K
Warm: 5,800K
THX: 5,600K

HCC VERDICT

Panasonic TX-P42VT20B
£1,800 Approx

Highs: Splendid overall picture quality; wireless networking works well; bursting with features
Lows: IFC side-effects; some judder issues; activating 3D is a chore

Performance: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Design: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Features: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

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Analogue dream

With its high-performance audio board, here's an HD disc spinner even stereo Luddites will appreciate. **Steve May** gets tweaky



If the Oppo BDP-83SE NuForce Edition looks familiar, it's because it is. This is a Special Edition of Oppo's long-lost European Blu-ray debutant, the BDP-83, with some additional pixie dust from NuForce.

NuForce is an American brand, which is best known for selling high-performance amplifiers and pre/power solutions. It offers a CD player and media server, but this modified Oppo is the company's first venture into the world of Blu-ray. The original BDP-83 was reviewed by *HCC* back in #175.

At the time, the brand was on the verge of setting up a UK base to develop its Blu-ray range. At the last minute, though, that plan seemed to collapse, and the BDP-83 was never given its proper release. Oppo's invasion of the UK was over almost as quickly as it had begun. So what's the story with this NuForce Edition? To find out more, we'll need to take a peek under the hood.

The player itself is the same battleship grade deck we saw on the standard version. It looks

Purple patch: A Special Edition that brings out all the nuances of Blu-ray

expensive and is reassuringly heavy. The unit has a distinctive textured front panel, with centrally placed mecha-deck and a USB input neatly disguised by a rubber bung. A universal model, it can play Super Audio CDs and DVD Audio discs, as well as the usual roster of BD, DVD and CD platters.

Back panel connections include HDMI, component and 7.1 analogue audio outputs, stereo phono outputs, coaxial and optical digital audio, LAN and a second USB port. For an audiophile special, it's perhaps

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Welcome back: AV-holics will be pleased to see the Oppo brand returning to the UK

→ Specifications

3D: *NO*
Upscaling: *YES* to 1080p
Multiregion: *NO* Region B BD/R2 DVD (although multiregion hacks are available for the DVD section)
HDMI: *YES* 1 v1.3
Component: *YES* 1
Multichannel analogue: *YES* 7.1 phonos
Digital audio: *YES* optical and coaxial digital outputs
SACD/DVD-A: *YES/YES*
Dolby True HD/DTS HD decoding: *YES/YES*
Dolby True HD/DTS HD bitstream: *YES/YES*
Profile 2.0: *YES*
Dimensions: 430(w) x 77(h) x 336(d)mm
Weight: 5.1kg
Features: Ethernet; DLNA support; online content portal; USB media playback; additional file support (MKV, DivX, AVI from USB); Sabre DACs; Pure Audio mode; backlit remote handset

surprising that balanced outputs haven't been added.

Dream streaming

For a BD player with audiophile pretensions, you might not expect too much in the way of networked media playback, but this BDP-83 SE has some surprises in store. From its home screen, you can scour your network for attached PCs and NAS devices and then start scrabbling around for content. Regretfully, file support is not that extensive. While it could see and play MKV-wrapped hi-def material and MPEGs, it was oblivious to AVI and DivX over my network. Playback from local USB flash drives fared better. From here, MKV playback was joined by those errant file types. The player can even play .srt subtitles. Audio playback is limited to MP3s; surprisingly there's no support for more esoteric music file formats, such as FLAC.

That said, I was impressed to find that when the player streamed music from my audio server, it also recognised and displayed the sleeve artwork I had sitting in the folder.

The deck also has access to a very modest online content portal, dubbed Blu-TV. Contrary to its salacious handle, there's little of interest here to inflame the extremities. The current Blu-TV offering breaks down into innocuous widgets, games and channels. At the time of writing, only one channel is available: Urban Trek – a UGC (User Generated Content) guide to US cities, with Flickr pictures and hotel and restaurant reviews. Navigation is hopeless, so I didn't feel inclined to persevere. Unless you really feel a need to play Solitaire or Sudoku through your Blu-ray deck, I don't think this will get much use.

AV/CV

Product: Modified Oppo BDP-83SE, for superior audio performance

Positioning: More expensive than the standard issue, this model is all about analogue audio excellence

Peers: Denon BDP-4010UD; Cambridge Audio Azur 650BD

DAC'll do nicely

NuForce's stated objective is to improve the analogue audio performance of this deck above the base model. So the power supply has been blessed with some new circuitry and Sabre DACs drafted in to replace the original's Cirrus Logic DACs. A single 8-channel Sabre DAC feeds the multichannel analogue output, while the stereo feed gets a particularly high-end audiophile solution, in the shape of an ESS Sabre[32] DAC divided equally between the two channels.

NuForce has made other less obvious (but quite inventive) changes, including removing redundant capacitors from the stereo signal path (it assumes the player will be partnered with pre-amps and AVRs which already have DC blocking circuits) in an effort to maximise signal quality. The company has also disabled the player's muting circuits, which silence any DAC operations which may generate noise. This tweak is a little contentious, as those muting circuits are there for a reason and that's to prevent unpleasant pops and buzzes. You need to get into the habit of turning on the player before your amp, as well as killing the volume when you hop from PCM to DSD in the Audio Setup screen.

Just to reiterate, all these audio improvements relate to the player's analogue board. You will not benefit if you just route audio over HDMI. Reflecting its refinement, the deck delivers a very low 155.4ps of analogue jitter.

The BD83's audio settings allow SACD DSD to bitstream directly to compatible (in all probability Sony) receivers; however, the engineers at NuForce suggest that converting to PCM in the player (aka Forced PCM Mode) before going to the Sabre[32] DAC is 'close to identical'. It's a >

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Good as gold: This NuForce edition offers gold-plated terminals

suck-it-and-see exercise. For me though, t'was not an issue. I wasn't using any DSD compliant hardware, so everything PCM was the only way to go.

Crystalline quality

In use, this bespoke BDP-83 is undeniably accomplished. Video quality is excellent, but it's no different from the standard BDP-83. **There's copious fine detail and a solidity to its images**, which is reassuring, but as you might expect, there's no provision for playing 3D material.

The setup menu offers a fair amount of control over image quality. In addition to brightness and contrast, you can also manage the levels of detail and edge enhancement, noise reduction, etc.

Perhaps more intriguing are the output options associated with the HDMI feed. The player uses Anchor Bay VRS deinterlacing and you can also apply CUE-Correction to remove Chroma Upscaling Errors. Of course, in most instances, the Auto setting is the best overall option, but at least cinephiles can feel smug that their player offers more than the mainstream competition.

So what of the player's audio performance, I hear you ask, and specifically the quality of its analogue PCM output?

For my main audition, I disabled all audio over HDMI and laced up the main stereo phono output with some heavy-duty Monster interconnects. One of my most revealing hi-res platters is by Emi Fujita. Called *Camomile Best Audio*, it's a Japanese SACD recording of MOR covers, with a stunning mid-range presentation. Delivered via this NuForce special, Fujita's vocals sounded absolutely beautiful, never more so than with a luxuriously unplugged version of *Walking in the Air*.

Stereo imaging is extremely precise, with an airy grace that goes a long way to justifying the ticket price. Once I started to listen, I didn't want to stop.

Are the new Sabre DACs better than high-end solutions from Burr-Brown? Unable to do specific A/B comparisons, it's impossible to say for sure. However, I found the deck to be deliciously precise, with an upper mid-range of crystalline clarity.

When it comes to bitstreaming out DTS-HD MA over HDMI, the performance onus inevitably shifts from the player to the decoding electronics, but there are no issues here with timing or musicality.

Lou Reed's *Berlin* (Blu-ray) is a wondrously atmospheric live concert shot by Julian Schnabel at the St Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn, 2006, and the Oppo revels in Reed's nuanced, mellifluous performance.

Marvellous indulgence

The bottom line is that this is a superb disc-spinner. Built on an already fine chassis, it delivers spectacular analogue audio from both high-resolution discs and standard CDs. It's even obliging when it comes to MP3s over a network. Of course, at £1,300 it's an indulgence, but if you're in the market for a Blu-ray player that can hold its head up high in the company of dedicated high-end CD players, there's nothing wrong with that.

Oppo's Special Edition BDP-83, modified by Californian specialists NuForce, is an intriguing proposition. If you want a BD player for audiophile music playback that doesn't cost silly money, it's an essential audition

Pass the port: The USB 2.0 port is hidden behind a flap on the front fascia



→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



Idling: Very efficient energy consumption



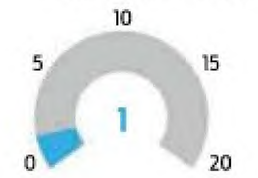
Powered: Playing Blu-rays, this Oppo uses one of the lowest amounts of energy we've ever measured

Audio Jitter: Ps



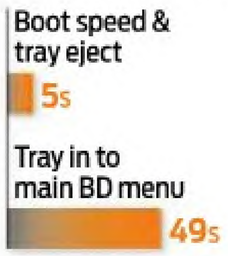
Sound: Extremely low internal jitter levels. Precision engineering at its best

Video Jitter: Ns



Vision: An astonishingly low video jitter measurement

Loading: Boot/Java



Disc loading & Java: Above average results for boot and load times

HCC VERDICT

Oppo BDP-83SE NuForce Edition
£1,300 Approx

Highs: Gorgeous two-channel analogue performance; excellent HD image quality; terrific build
Lows: Lacklustre online content portal; not compatible with 3D BD

Performance: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Design: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Features: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

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If you're in luck come April 2011, you will be flown from the UK to Fiji's Viti Levu Island. Your adventure will begin with a river trip by raft that will take you to the remote Upper Navua Gorge, where the black lava rock walls overgrown with cascades of lush ferns are so remarkable that this stretch of river has been hailed "a river of Eden." Here you will join the party on the 140-foot Tui Tai sailboat, living aboard in laid-back luxury, taking in the truly awesome tropical sights and cruising leisurely to remote locations only accessible by boat. You will be able to snorkel over reefs that are a hundred miles from the closest resort, go on epic hikes off the beaten path and meet local villagers and learn their customs. It really is a trip to the heart of paradise.

Teva are no strangers to adventure or being off the beaten track. The Teva House concept first came about in Vail during the Teva Mountain Games in June 2010. Teva established its presence at a specially selected and equipped house in the resort that became the perfect hub where athletes and contest winners could mix and mingle in a chilled-out, inclusive environment. For 2011 Teva has taken the Teva House one step further by creating the Teva Houseboat experience – aboard the Tui Tai in the waters of the South Pacific.

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No-thrills spinner

Adrian Justins auditions an inexpensive, 3D-capable Blu-ray home theatre system and finds it lacking a little lustre

The art of designing AV kit to look contemporary and even attractive is a skill that seems to have passed Panasonic by – its designers refuse to match the exterior aesthetics or the menu systems of its products to the technological innovation that lies within their often dour exteriors.

The BTT350's main unit, for example, looks almost the same as one of the brand's early DVD players, or dare I say it, a late VCR. Yet, this innocuous box is capable of serving up eye-popping full HD 3D images, to say nothing of its multimedia talents, including VieraCast internet video, DLNA networking, SD card playback and a built-in iPod/iPhone dock.

It's also a fully-fledged home cinema system, with 5.1 capability out of the box and the potential to deliver 7.1 surround sound by adding extra speakers and an optional wireless kit. As per the main unit itself, the dinky sound boxes are remarkably unassuming to look at, if solidly built, although the side-firing sub looks as if it were made from MDF offcuts and warrants, like the main unit, being kept out of sight.

Be warned that when you place an iPod in the recessed dock on the top of the unit the overall height goes from 62mm to 150mm, which may be too much of a snug fit for some shelving systems.

Easy route

The connections are hardly generous, but they do tick most of the AV boxes. Naturally, there's an HDMI v1.4, and this has an audio return channel, through which you can route your TV's sound, while using the single digital optical input for a games console, perhaps.

The BTT350 is a DLNA fiend that's easy to integrate into a home network using wired or wireless LAN connections.

The DY-WL10 wi-fi adapter is an invaluable optional extra that simplifies the process of setting up a network and accessing Panasonic's rather limited VieraCast internet video service.

It seems incongruous to find a composite video output on the rear of the unit, but this is the only video conduit that functions with the iPod dock. You can access an iPod's music folders using HDMI or digital optical, but if you really want a laugh try watching a video on a 50in plasma

AV/CV

Product:
5.1 3D Blu-ray home cinema system

Positioning:
At the affordable end of a range of 12 such systems

Peers:
Sony BDV-E370; Samsung HT-C6930W; LG HX995TZ

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Rattle and roll: The diminutive speakers do have a tendency to rattle at high volume

using composite video. It's similar to watching TV through a fish tank.

Setting up the system is straightforward, thanks to the colour-coded speaker wires and an easy setup wizard that guides you effortlessly through the various parameters, provided you don't lose interest when navigating the soporifically dull menus. There's no auto setup microphone; instead you can adjust the level of each channel manually while listening to white noise. Call me Mr Sad, but I think this is actually kinda fun. There are four 'easy listening' DSP modes: flat; heavy; clear and soft.

Setup enables you to choose which input is used for your TV's sound and whether or not to convert all sources to multichannel output. You can also engage Quick Start or Low Power standby, which registers 0.2W on the consumption scale.

The remote control is compact yet nicely laid out using Panasonic's eclectic Start button as the route to all sources and functions. The main annoyance is the absence of an eject button on the handset.

By default, the centre channel has a few more dB up its sleeve than the other satellites, and this allows subtle dialogue to shine through, such as The Thing's mutterings on the Brooklyn Bridge scene in *The Fantastic Four's* DTS MA-HD soundtrack on Blu-ray. Yet the subwoofer lacks subtlety and blooms slightly when the going gets tough. It also vibrates uncomfortably with bass-heavy music.

My THX test disc showed that rear effects can be nicely imaged, but as expected from such compact satellites, the upper part of the spectrum is clipped, producing a raspy metallic sound, especially at high volume when the cabinets also rattle. So long as you don't drive it too hard, though, the BTT350 will reward you with decent, involving audio, infinitely superior to any flatscreen's built-in speakers.

2D demon

Picture wise, the system is no slouch either. On both 42in Panasonic and 50in Samsung 3D plasmas it conjured up a highly-polished and engrossing *Monsters vs Aliens* 3D experience. But in fact it's with 2D that the player's prowess is best observed. With *Avatar* and The *Fantastic Four* detail levels don't quite match some of the elite decks out there, but overall images are, vibrant and capable of subtle gradations even in low light.

There's a lot about the BTT350 that won't make a home cinema enthusiast get overexcited. But it is a well built and solid performer that's very reasonably priced, so could be an ideal first step on the ladder for an AV novice

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



Idling: A little high, but not unexpected since this is an all-in-one unit



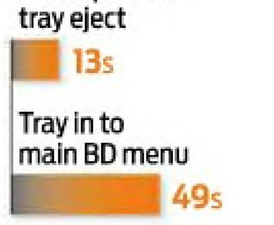
Playing: An average consumption of 82W with our test disc at a typical volume

Video Jitter: Ns



Jitter: This is a commendable figure. The user will enjoy clear picture quality

Loading: Boot/Java



Disc loading & Java: Tray-in speed is acceptable – boot up is a bit of a drag

→ Specifications

3D playback: *YES*
Video upscaling: *YES* up to 1080p
Multiregion: *NO* Region B (BD); R2 (DVD)
HDMI: *YES* v1.4 with ARC
Component video: *NO*
Multichannel phono audio: *NO*
Digital audio: *YES* 1 x optical input
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD: *YES/YES*
Dolby True HD/DTS-HD bitstream: *YES/YES*
Profile 2.0: *YES* (requires SD card)
Total Amplification (claimed): 1,000W
Dimension (main unit): 430(w) x 62(h) x 287(d)mm
Weight (main unit): 3.5kg
Other features: 1080p/24 playback; FM radio; CD playback; DLNA wi-fi/ethernet; iPod dock built-in; VieraCast; BD-Live; USB port; AVCHD/MP3/WMA/JPEG/mkv/MP4/DivX/XviD playback



HCC VERDICT

Panasonic SC-BTT350
£370 Approx

Highs: Decent BD player; simplicity of use; plenty of multimedia functions
Lows: Unexciting styling; sonically, it's incapable of reaching very high volume; the connections are very limited

Performance: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Design: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Features: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Overall: 1 2 **3** 4 5

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Cut to the core

Cliff Joseph still isn't won over by Apple's revamped rental box



No Glee: The TV shows option that operates in the US is not available to users in the UK

The new-look AppleTV replaces the original 2007 model. It's smaller than its predecessor, measuring a mere 3.9ins wide and deep, and just 0.9in high. The reduction in size – and price cut from £200 to £100 – was made possible by removing the hard disk. This means that the AppleTV can only be used to rent and stream video now, as there's no way of buying and permanently storing anything on this model. However, you do still have the option of buying content using iTunes on your Mac/PC and then streaming them to the AppleTV over your home network.

All that's left inside the smaller box is a processor and a handful of connectors, including HDMI, optical digital audio output, and both Ethernet and Wireless-N networking. Output via HDMI is limited to 720p.

The hardware may have changed drastically, but the onscreen interface looks more familiar, with the same straightforward setup procedure and attractive menu system. I had no trouble streaming some rented HD films from the iTunes Store via a Wi-Fi connection, and it was a snap to stream both audio and video from my desktop Mac to the AppleTV, too.

ITunes doesn't hack it

However, Apple still hasn't addressed the AppleTV's real weakness, which is that it only enables you to view video content that is available from the iTunes Store. Although iTunes is the dominant force in the music download market, it's just one of many outlets for film and TV content on the 'net. Without access to other non-Apple video services, the AppleTV is simply too limited in scope for users in the UK.

The company is being a bit cagey about this, but it's thought that the new model now runs the same iOS software that also powers Apple's iPhone and iPad. It was hoped that this would allow the player to run iPhone apps, such as BBC iPlayer, and in so doing would open it up to a wider range of online video services. In the US, the AppleTV can access the popular NetFlix online rental service. However, NetFlix is only available in the US, and UK-based services such as the BBC iPlayer, 4oD, or LOVEFiLM are nowhere to be seen.

This means that **UK users are restricted to the limited and expensive selection of material that is available via the iTunes Store**.

A new HD release such as *Kick-Ass* costs a hefty £4.50 to rent with other recent releases averaging £3.50, and older, standard-def titles going down to £2.50. The pricing isn't attractive – especially compared to the amount of films and programmes I can watch online with my £13 monthly LOVEFiLM subscription.

I'm also shocked to see that the UK version of the AppleTV is limited to film rentals only. The 'TV Shows' option available on the US version is missing here.

It is still possible to rent TV programmes using iTunes on a Mac or PC and streaming them across your home network, but a device that doesn't enable you to directly rent or buy TV programmes hardly seems to merit the name AppleTV.

Limited appeal

If the rumour that the AppleTV will, indeed, get its own version of the iPhone App Store comes true, then this box's appeal will grow, but right now the material available to UK users via iTunes is too limited and too expensive for me to recommend the AppleTV in its current form ●

AV/CV

Product: Streaming media player, with access to iTunes rentals

Positioning: Apple's weakest link

Peers: Boxee; Sky, Virgin and BT Vision services

→ Specifications

Storage: NO The HDD has been removed for this second-gen box
DLNA Compliant: NO But it will stream iTunes from your Mac/PC
Connectivity: HDMI; optical-digital audio; 10/100 Ethernet; 802.11n Wi-Fi
Dimensions: 23(h) x 99(w) x 99(d)mm
Weight: 0.27Kg
Features: Online film rentals from the UK iTunes store; also connects to YouTube, Flickr, and a selection of online podcasts and radio stations; audio and video can be streamed from a Mac or PC running iTunes



HCC VERDICT

AppleTV
£100 Approx

Highs: A breeze to set up and use and features an attractive graphical interface
Lows: Limited content available via iTunes in the UK; rentals are comparatively expensive

Performance: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Design: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Features: 1 **2** 3 4 5
Overall: 1 **2** 3 4 5

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72 SYNOLOGY DS410 → £400 Approx → www.synology.com

Spreading the net far and wide

Serious about home media servers? Then go large. **Martin Pipe** has...

A speedy and convenient means of backing up data and distributing multimedia files, the well-built DS410 can accommodate an impressive total of 8TB in its four drive bays. You install the drives, and thus have total control over capacity and upgrades. Both 2.5 and 3.5in SATA drives are supported, as are various implementations of RAID technology.

Highs

- The onboard DLNA media server works well with a variety of media players. It dovetails with Windows, while Apple applications (like iTunes and TimeMachine) are supported. Various embedded 'station' applications are also available for downloads (eg BitTorrent), and multimedia streaming.
- Setup is straightforward, thanks to a powerful and flexible web interface that also enables you to manage disks and multiple users/privileges, backup from PCs or to external eSATA/USB storage devices.



Cutely compact: The DS410 is small but powerful

Lows

- Some firmware is stored in non-volatile memory. This can cause problems, though we're told you'll still be able to boot up in the event of a system-partition crash.
- Energy consumption is going to be high when fully-loaded, even with 4 x 2.5in drives. However, the DS410 does boast nifty power management facilities such as auto drive-spindown, fan control, LAN wake-up and scheduled uptime. In any case, it runs surprisingly quietly.
- Although the DS410 will accommodate those low-consumption and quieter-running 2.5in drives (and even comes with all the necessary screws), Synology doesn't include the brackets that allow them to be fitted into the 3.5in bays, so you must remember to buy them yourself when ordering the drives.

HCC VERDICT

Synology DS410
£40 Approx (no drives)

Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

WD LIVEWIRE → £85 Approx → www.wdc.com

Rock it in the socket...

Wi-Fi not reliable enough? **Martin Pipe** networks via his mains

Powerline networking is a convenient way of bridging the network 'gaps' in your house without recourse to hard-to-hide CAT-5 cable or undependable Wi-Fi. The Livewire packs two powerline adapters; plug one into the mains sockets at the network gear end, the other in the remote location for which access is required; connect the Ethernet cables, press the 'sync' button on one of the Livewires, and it will seek out and then pair itself to the other. Easy!

Highs

- Works very well indeed. We streamed 1.4Mbps uncompressed audio, 5Mbps MPEG-2 SD video and 7Mbps 720p hi-def (x264 codec) without any unwanted hiccups. Western Digital claims speeds of up to 200Mbps (provided that the conditions are ideal).
- A four-port hub on each device simplifies connection to multiple devices. This could be very useful if the remote room hosts a Blu-ray player, games console and network-enabled TV, for example.
- 28-bit encryption, which ensures that your data traffic is secure from eavesdropping, is automatically applied. No need to configure or remember passwords.



Lows

- Like all other powerline communications systems, both adapters need to be on the same mains circuit, otherwise they may fail to find each other.
- 'Dirty' mains supplies and the use of filters/conditioners, or even extension cables, can affect performance, so best to plug the adapters directly into wall sockets. The integrated hubs are a great idea, but multiple 'active' devices will be competing for bandwidth.

HCC VERDICT

WD Livewire
£85 Approx

Overall: 1 2 3 4 **5**

In Brief

The Avengers: A Celebration
£25, Titan Books



Yet another book about this classic spy-fi TV series – and why not? The erudite Marcus Hearn's glossy hardback is an educational and entertaining analysis, featuring tons of fascinating facts, and hundreds of rare and fabulous photos which include, of course, Diana Rigg in bondage gear

1 2 3 4 **5**

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74 WD TV LIVE HUB MEDIA PLAYER → £200 → www.shopwd.co.uk

WD drives towards domination

Chris Jenkins checks out a media player with big storage attached



WD's digital media players include the cut-down WDTV Mini and advanced WDTV and networkable WD TV Live. So this version, with its built-in 1Tb storage drive, can be regarded as a logical development.

The Hub is designed to play files from practically any digital source including downloads, USB storage devices and portable media players. It supports a vast range of file formats including HD video, audio, images, subtitles and disc images. It offers smooth, glitch-free playback of 1080p video, streams from DNLA network drives and can use wi-fi via an optional dongle. We used a tiny UMD-606N from Solwise (www.solwise.co.uk) - a worthwhile investment for just £7.50!

The Hub's revised GUI makes navigation and control simple; you can also plug in a standard USB keyboard. BBC iPlayer functions should come in an update.

Packing power: plays files from almost all types of digital source

There's a comprehensive remote control, a generous selection of connections including HDMI v1.4, and new features including media library sync and personalised backgrounds.

Highs

- Marvellously comprehensive file format support with the promise of upgrades, new interactive functions and a Web access.
- Internal drive makes it easy to compile a one-stop media library.

Lows

- Case design is large and clunky compared to the previous non-storage models.
- Cost added by the drive might put off the casual buyer.

HCC VERDICT

WD TV Live Hub
£200 Approx

Overall: 1 2 3 4 **5**

PANASONIC DMR-BW780 → £500 Approx → www.panasonic.co.uk

Hi-def handyman recorder

Martin Pipe is almost sold on this flexible media recorder

This slimline beauty can not only play DVDs and Blu-ray discs, but also records them. Thanks to DVB-T2 technology, HD and SD digital TV programmes alike can be captured by the 250GB HDD. There are two such tuners, and so you can record two different channels at the same time or watch one while another records. Good news if your HDTV lacks a Freeview HD tuner.

Highs

- An in-built DLNA media server enables you to share standard-def video, JPEG photos, and some types of HD content with compatible devices, including many flatscreen TVs. Thanks to networking, the world of BD-Live content is open to you (with an SD card inserted). So, too, is Panasonic's 'Vieracast' portal.
- Easy to install and intuitive to use. The Freeview+ HD certification ensures that the BW780's PVR division is well-specified, with digital teletext, 'timeshifting', and EPG scheduling of the 32-event timer (if the programme you want to record is available in HD, you're told).
- Picture and sound quality are excellent with both HD and SD material. Bitstream (DR-mode) recording means that there's no loss of quality relative to the original broadcast. Blu-ray and DVD playback cannot be faulted, either.

Lows

- Although there's a CD-ripping jukebox on board, the media server won't stream any of the music you've stored to compatible devices. And even after the relevant DR-mode bitstreams are converted to another mode that would be compatible with most devices, HD recordings can't be shared, and broadcasts aren't currently allowed by Freeview.
- Camcorder material aside, you can't copy HD to DVD. Using the lowest bitrate (HM) mode, though, a cheap 4.7GB DVD-R could store nearly 3hrs of HD material, but this can only be copied to DVD in SD form. DVD recording is multi-format.
- Lacks the network media player features even of cheap BD players.



HCC VERDICT

Panasonic DMR-BW780
£500 Approx

Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

In Brief

FIFA 11
Electronic Arts
£50 approx



After the success of last year's update, it was hard to see how Electronic Arts (EA) could improve its football franchise. But, through a combination of tweaks to the Career Mode, a new passing system and the introduction of player personalities on the pitch, it has managed to make the best even better.

1 2 3 4 **5**

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- Features World Leading Single Coaxial Transmission, designed to simplify Installation
- 1080p 120M / 720p 230M long distance Ultra High Quality Video with 7.1 channels surround sounds transmission
- Built-in 1 to 2 Coaxial Splitter in Sender and One Coaxial Cascade output in Receiver for great extension flexibility
- Up to 5 layers Cascadable for up to 600M 1080p video transmission and up to 10 TVs/Displays/Projectors connected
- BNC connector designed for solid dependable connection
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Code PCE122	Transmitter & receiver pair	£515.78
Code PCE122R	Additional receive	£277.73

£515.78

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Receiver



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Code VS184 **£89.00**

GIGAVIDEO 800 Wireless HDMI Sender

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Code GV800 **£347.46**

HDMI over IP Network!

Send HDMI signals via your computer network with this amazing device, true plug and play with no in-depth networking capability required. A flexible, scalable, low cost solution to distributing 1080P HDMI to multiple displays. Amazing!

IR feedback from receiver to transmitter

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Code PB900 1 sender and 1 receiver pair **£375.00**

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Code HDUSPRO **£85.00**

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Ullo John, gotta new flatscreen?

HCC's technology curator **Martin Pipe** takes a look at a Freeview HD TV with built-in media player. He thinks it's not half bad



Anyone of a certain vintage will fondly recall the 'Ullo Tosh' ads of the mid-80s. Inspired by an Alexei Sayle comedy single and voiced by the much-missed Ian Dury, Toshiba's 'Blueprint Man' would extol the virtues of the company's midi systems and the latest in flatter, squarer TV sets. But none of the copywriters involved in this memorable ad campaign could have foreseen the sophistication that today's TV sets would reach.

This one, with its contemporary styling, is equipped with a 46in LED-backlit, full HD flatscreen that can be wall- or stand-mounted. But while Tosh's offerings in 1985 stood out from the rest of the year's crop, the 46SL753 looks distinctly average, with a bezel wide enough to drive a bus through. And despite a 25-year gap, the two share something in common – both are 2D-only. Toshiba fans hankering for a 3D experience need to wait for the forthcoming WL768 model.

The 46SL753 nevertheless builds in some impressive 21st century tech. Most notably, its DTT tuner caters for Freeview HD channels, in addition to the EPG, digital teletext, subtitles and multiple soundtracks. Analogue channels (with Nicam and teletext) are covered, too, should you live in the middle of nowhere. Then there's the integrated media player, which will pull compatible content off your DLNA home network (wirelessly, with an optional dongle) or a USB storage device. There's also an SD card slot, meaning you can whip the card from your digital camera and temporarily convert this Tosh into a large-scale picture frame.

Unfortunately, the digital wizardry of the 46SL753 stops short of providing iPlayer compatibility. Come to think of it, you don't get internet video of any kind; the content portals so beloved by the likes of Panasonic, Philips and Samsung are conspicuous by their absence. Fear not, though, as Toshiba has included a D-Sub VGA port for your laptop or PC. Dedicated computer hardware tends to deliver far better results from online services than the limited capabilities of a TV, and you're not ring-fenced by a brand, either.

CEC it and see

In other respects, the connections are impressive. Four 1080p24-compatible HDMI ports (one of which is side-mounted), two Scarts and a component input cater for just about every current source eventuality. The integral digital tuner has been endowed with a digital audio output and a CI slot for Pay-TV upgrades. CEC device control (known here as 'Regza-Link') will enable the basic functions of many recent source components to be driven by the TV's handset – I found this worked fine on a Panasonic Blu-ray recorder.

The gloss-finished handset itself could be of better design. For a start, it's not backlit. Another criticism is its central joypad, which is surrounded by a disc of additional controls. The spacing between the two regions is insufficient, and as a result, you can accidentally nudge into effect the wrong function. Similar criticisms can be made of the handsets supplied with recent Sony sets. However, Sony TVs take advantage of the company's excellent Xross Media Bar onscreen user interface. Compared to this, the 46SL753's menu system is plain boring. However, it's well-designed – making this Tosh easy enough to drive.

Indeed, the friendly wizard-driven auto-setup routine kicks off the flawless tuning process. The whole roster of functions can be adjusted from the menu system. The 'SoundNavi' audio system, which boasts a non-adjustable graphic equaliser, can be optimised for wall or stand-mounting. On the visual side, adjustments include colour temperature (with R/G/B tweaks), film stabilisation (motion smoothness), gamma and black/white level. Other features include sleep/programme timers; a proper mains switch; the ability to display real-time picture brightness/colour histograms; an 'expert' mode for colour calibration; (defeatable) Autoview sensor-based brightness/contrast adjustment according to >

AV/CV

Product: 46in LED TV with Freeview HD and integrated media player

Positioning: Currently tops Toshiba's 'SL' range

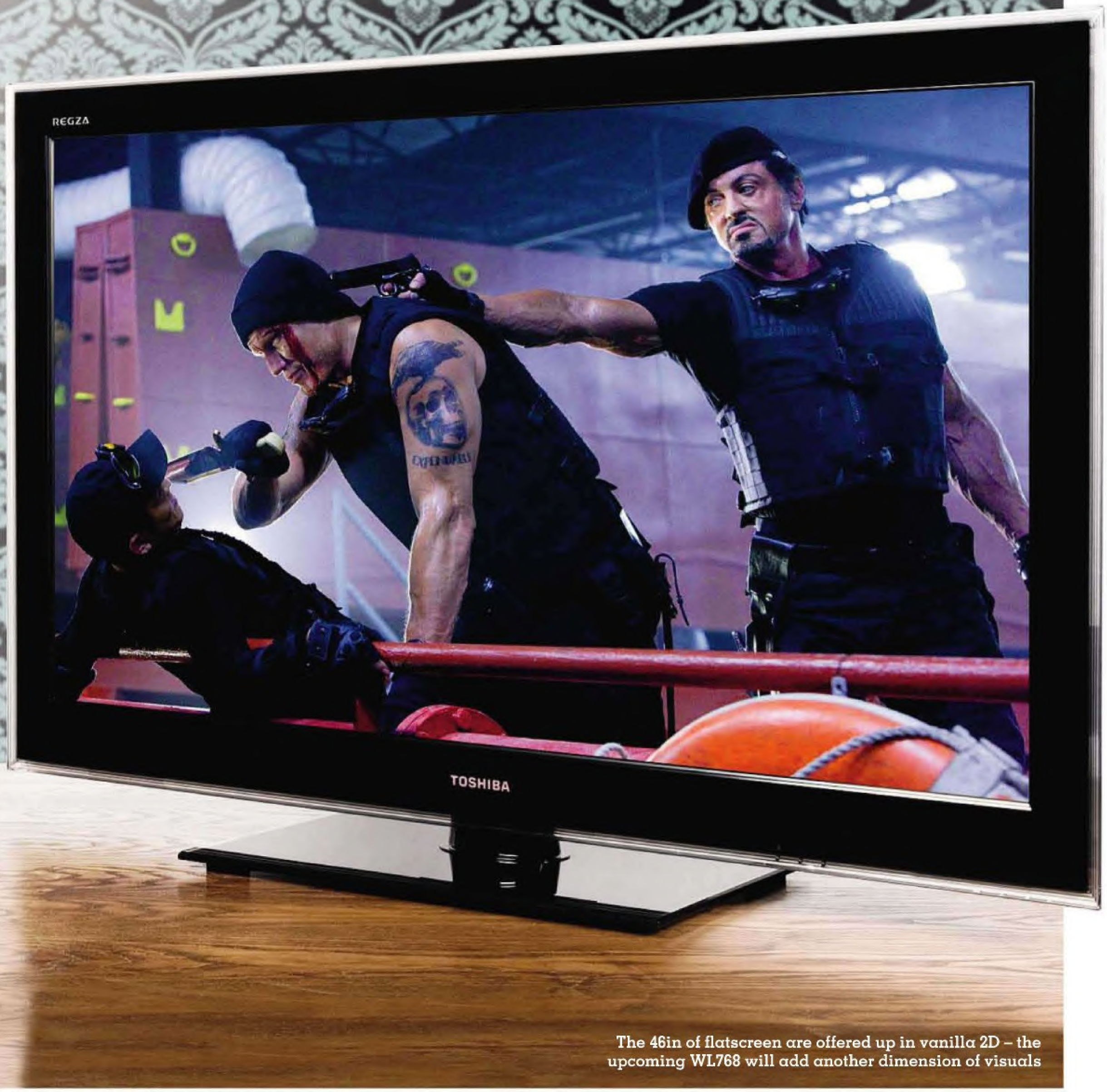
Peers: Samsung UE46C6530; Sony KDL-46EX403

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➜ Specifications

3D: *NO* Full HD: *YES* 1080p/24
Tuner: *YES* Freeview HD, analogue. CI slot for digital Pay-TV
Component video: *YES* 1 set
HDMI: *YES* 4 (one side-mounted) PC input: *YES* D-Sub (VGA)
Resolution: 1,920 x 1,080 Sound: 20W RMS
Brightness (claimed): 450 cd/m² Contrast ratio (claimed): 4,000,000:1
Dimensions (without stand): 1,140(w) x 713(h) x 50(d)mm
Weight (without stand): 18.5kg
Features: LED edge backlighting; 4ms response time; 178 degree viewing angle; auto backlight control; Active Vision M100 HD Pro 100Hz picture processing; Resolution+ upscaling; DLNA media player; digital photo-frame mode; AutoView (sensor); 3D colour management; multi-standard; MPEG noise reduction; Audyssey EQ, Dolby Volume; SoundNavi; 'quick menu' and TV audio soundtrack selection buttons recommended; built-in picture wizard; colour management; wide colour gamut option



The 46in of flatscreen are offered up in vanilla 2D – the upcoming WL768 will add another dimension of visuals

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Get tweaking: Default settings are acceptable, but a few minutes with a calibration disc won't go unrewarded

ambient lighting conditions; plus a range of picture/sound modes and aspect ratios. Good stuff.

Performance

The proof, as ever, is in the pudding. And this Toshiba is a bit like a Sara Lee chocolate gateaux – good, but not Michelin standard.

With Blu-ray movies, I was impressed with the range and depth of colour offered here. The subjective balance of black, white and everything in between is also more than acceptable, thanks, no doubt, to the LED backlighting – although our Tech Labs rated its contrast below the standards set by much of the competition (see top right). I couldn't fault the brightness or the resolution of intricate details, as seen in the Blu-rays of *Moon* and *Transformers*. However, I would recommend you experiment with the picture settings using a calibration disc to get the most natural picture.

Toshiba's proprietary processing isn't as obtrusive as that of some brands, with none of the awful 'greasing' of movement that makes film look so unnatural. There was, however, a little backlight inconsistency, visible at the extremities of the screen during profoundly dark scenes – although this is something we're seeing quite often with edge LED TVs.

Switch to pics from the in-built tuner and things noticeably deteriorate. Compared to DVD playback via HDMI, SD Freeview pictures are rather soft – and a noise reduction feature does little to address the visible feathering that spoils sharply defined outlines.

Strangely, pictures from digital broadcasts received on a PC tuner and streamed via my network actually looked better. On which subject, the 46SL753's media player lacks supports for codecs such as x.264/mkv and DivX/XviD. A pity.

Deadman's chest

Sound quality, though, is atrocious. It may as well be coming from an old tea chest. Lifeless and dull, there's a serious mid-band wediness that renders dialogue unpleasant to hear.

Those disappointing sonics are an affront to well-produced music programmes such as *Later... with Jools Holland*. The only good things that can be said here are a) Dolby Volume 'normalises' sound levels to reduce the 'jumps' frequently encountered when changing channel and b) the sound can be turned off altogether via a menu. It's about time that flatscreen TV manufacturers paid more attention to audio, but for now, I'd advise any buyers of this TV to stick with external AV gear.

A 46in LED TV for £1,000 is not a bad deal, but Toshiba's problem – as has been the case for a few years now – is that Sony and Samsung can match that price with better featured sets. The 46SL753 leaves us hankering for the arrival of Tosh's CEVO TV more than ever

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



White screen: Quite efficient - and with the AutoView setting, we measured 60W



Test footage: In general, we see a drop in power consumption with movie footage, but this Toshiba didn't change

Contrast: ratio



Picture: Well, this doesn't come close to Toshiba's 4,000,000:1 measurement. Calling on Dynamic mode increases to 7,500:1. Luminance at 92fL is high, however

Colour temp: Kelvin



Presets: Some of the Tosh's ten presets are close to the ideal 6500K standard set by the CIE and it's possible to achieve that through calibration
0: 5,300K
2: 6,100K
3: 6,600K
4: 6,900K
5: 7,250K
10: 1,0150K



HCC VERDICT

Toshiba 46SL753
£1,000 Approx

Highs: Strong HD pictures; easy to use; calibration-friendly
Lows: Competing models are better featured; weak audio; Freeview visuals could be better

Performance: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Design: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Features: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Overall: 1 2 **3** 4 5

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AV/CV

Product:
A home cinema projector using SXRD technology and Sony's Real Colour Processor

Positioning:
Around the middle of Sony's range

Peers:
Panasonic's PT-AE4000; Vivitek H5080

Sony has endowed the HW20 with a new optical system that gives contrast levels a leg up

HOME CINEMA Choice ★★★★★ BEST BUY

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SXRD's makeover

Sony reinvents its exclusive SXRD wheel with its new projector and puts a big smile on **John Archer's** face in the process

With JVC promising all sorts of high-level upgrades for its imminent series of new D-ILA projectors, Sony is under pressure as it rolls out its annual updates to its rival SXRD PJs.

I've already seen and been impressed with a preview model of Sony's SXRD 3D projector, the VW90ES, but now it's the turn of what will likely be the brand's new 'mass market' SXRD option. What's more, this is a finished review sample, so any serious flaws I find will be too late for Sony to fix!

On receiving the HW20, my initial thoughts were that it was going to replace last year's very likeable VPL-HW15 model, but this is not the case. Apparently, the HW15 is going to continue, with the HW20 slotting above it in the range and adding around £500 to the HW15's price (unless the HW15 starts to quickly become heavily discounted).

Obviously, if the HW20 is going to be positioned above the HW15, it needs to have something extra to offer, and I was pleasantly surprised to find just how large that bonus is.

For it turns out that, rather than just incrementally improving on the previous SXRD chip design and implementation, Sony has gone back to the drawing board and has not only created a wholly new chipset for the HW20 (featuring even finer inter-pixel spacing than the previous version), but also introduced a completely new optical system.

As a result, Sony reckons that it's been able to boost the HW20's contrast and brightness levels by around 30 per cent each, compared with the HW15, resulting in claimed 80,000:1 contrast ratio and 1300 ANSI Lumens brightness figures.

These are both fine numbers to find quoted for a reasonably affordable home cinema projector, even if I do have to stress that the 80,000:1 contrast ratio figure is a dynamic one (measured with the assistance of an active, automatic iris), rather than a native figure such as those claimed for JVC's more expensive D-ILA lightboxes.

Me and Iris

Dynamic iris systems are traditionally viewed with scepticism by serious home cinema buffs and with good reason. For if they're not done well they can cause distracting over-aggressive jumps in overall brightness levels, or prove pretty poor judges of the best balance between brightness and contrast that a particular shot or scene demands.

However, the HW20 goes way further than most sub-£3K projectors to counter these potential dynamic iris problems. It gives end users much more control over exactly how much involvement the dynamic iris has in picture production.

You can, for instance, adjust the speed of the iris's reactions and the 'default' amount of light it lets through. So, for example, you can reduce its aggressiveness if you've got a fully blacked-out room. Or you can start it off set to a higher brightness point if you've got a bit of ambient light to compete with.

You can also turn the dynamic iris off entirely.

As a home cinema fan, whenever I'm thinking about projectors at >

→ Specifications

3D ready: *NO*
Full HD : *YES* 1080p/24
Component video: *YES* 1
HDMI: *YES* 2 v1.3
PC input: *YES* 1 D-Sub
12V trigger: *NO* could be a problem
Resolution: 1,920 x1,080
Brightness (claimed): 1300 ANSI Lumens
Contrast ratio (claimed): 80,000:1 dynamic
Dimensions: 407(w) x 179(h) x 464(d)mm Weight: 10kg
Features: SXRD system; 1.6x optical zoom; vertical and horizontal image shifting; 200W lamp; 40-300in image size; Real Colour Processor; Gamma adjustment; black level booster; film mode; 20dB fan noise

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around the £2K-£3K price point, it's impossible not to have in mind Panasonic's PT-AE4000. This is partly because of its sterling, if not quite stellar performance, but mostly because of the prodigious toolset it carries for optimising picture setup.

Sony may have had Panasonic's flexible friend in mind when compiling its own calibration tools, because options include a full colour management system via Sony's Real Colour Processor (RCP), high and low lamp output levels, gamma tweaks and a black booster.

The RCP takes an unusually visual approach to picture calibration. For instance, when you choose a particular primary colour – be it red, green, blue, cyan, magenta or yellow – only that colour remains in the picture, so that you can focus on it in isolation. Adjustments can be done via a circular graph of the colour spectrum combined with some numeric tuning of colour and hue.

While I admire the thinking behind the RCP and suspect it might engage novice tinkerers more than the standard colour calibration approach, I found the RCP a bit too unconventional and long-winded in its presentation for comfortable use. But all the same, there's no doubting its innate cleverness or ability to really improve pictures if you're patient with it.

In aesthetic and connection terms the HW20 is all but identical to the HW15. This is no bad thing given that model's sleek, glossy, tastefully sculpted looks and provision of two HDMIs and a D-Sub PC jack among its connections. The only major absentee is a 12V trigger, which will annoy those hoping for integrated system control.

Tooled up: The HW20 offers dual HDMI inputs

Handles well: The remote is sensibly laid out and usable. And it's backlit, of course



Big improvements

The enhancements wrought on the HW20's picture quality by the improved chipset and optics are immediately and impressively apparent. If the HW15 had a fault, it was that pictures looked just a touch insipid versus what rivals such as Epson were doing. But the HW20 puts this right fairly comprehensively.

For one thing, its black level response is much better, allowing it to show the dark sequence of the ill-fated Dallas vent expedition on the new *Alien* Blu-ray with a really natural touch. I mean this in terms of both the lack of greyness hanging over the darkest corners, and the amount of shadow detail lurking in every nook and cranny of the labyrinthine pipes.

Also **key to the image's dynamism is a much improved colour response**. This finds the gorgeously vibrant colours of the *How To Train Your Dragon* Blu-ray really powering off the screen, especially given the very healthy black counterpoint to all the new-found colour gymnastics.

It's apparent, too, that the new chipset and optics have allowed Sony to produce a much better innate contrast performance with the HW20, since you don't have to compromise brightness levels, as much as you do with the HW15, in order to achieve a believable black colour. In fact, the picture looks more than satisfyingly dynamic even without the dynamic iris turned on That said the dynamic iris is actually a very good example of its art, reacting quickly and cleverly enough not to cause much overt saturation or brightness shifting.

Add to the already impressive mix, good motion handling and some excellent sharpness and detailing from HD sources, and you've got a projector that's ridiculously accomplished for its sub £2,500 price level.

In fact, aside from the fact that I had to spend more time than I'd have liked tweaking its colours, I struggled to really find fault with the HW20 considering its price point

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts





White screen: A 250W energy consumption with our 100IRE pattern is similar to its rivals

Test footage: During our test sequence we measured no change in power use

Contrast: ratio



Picture: The true contrast ratio was outstanding from this Sony projector – and we measured a dynamic contrast ratio of 75,746:1.

Colour temp: Kelvin



Presets: Out of the box colour temperature was very accurate with the Low setting. Full adjustments are available
High: 9,928K
Middle: 7,47K
Low: 6,400K



HCC VERDICT

Sony VPL-HW20, £2,400 approx

Highs: Design; excellent picture quality; decent picture adjustments; good value and connectivity
Lows: Colours need adjusting; adjustment tools aren't standard

Performance: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Design: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Features: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Overall: 1 2 3 4 **5**

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Finishing touches

Adrian Justins trawls the shelves for those must-have home cinema extras

ARCAM RCUBE

Approx £500

You can pay less than £25 for an iPod dock, but serious audiophile performance comes at an equally serious price. The stylishly crafted rCube is blessed with 90W RMS power output, has 100mm bass/mid drivers and 25mm aluminium dome tweeters and uses the same type of audiophile capacitors and op amps as the company's high-end FMJ range.

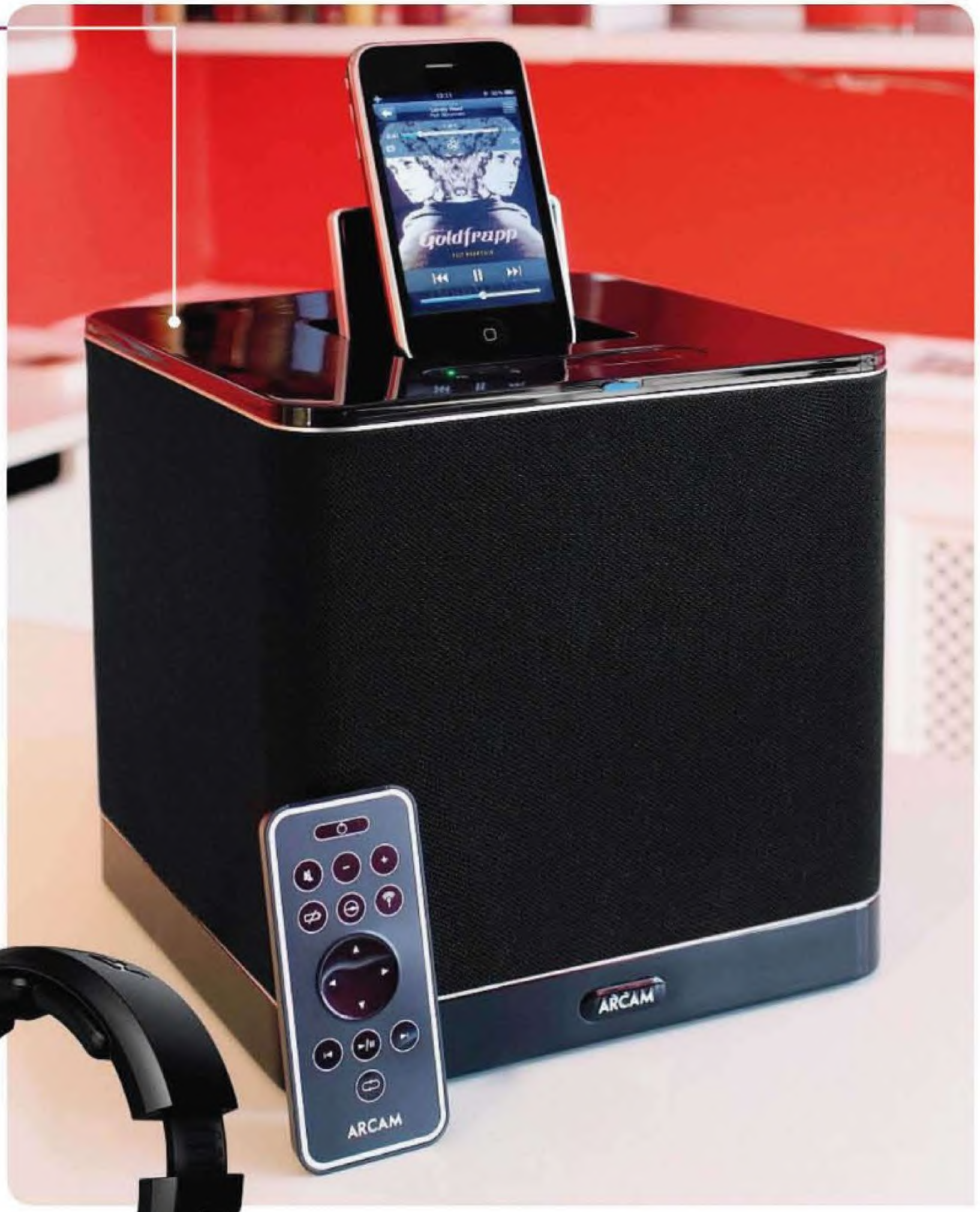
Seven separate power supplies feed the digital and analogue sections of the main board to avoid inter-modulation and reduce noise. The bass-mid drivers have a bucking magnet system to avoid magnetic interference between the them, and a back-to-back force-cancelling system to minimise internal vibration.

Measuring 200mm in any dimension and boasting an eight-hour Li-ion battery, portability is another of the rCube's attributes. It can even transmit and receive CD quality non-compressed audio signals from other rCubes, iPod/Phones or computers using Arcam's optional Kleer wireless transmitter dongles.

www.arcam.co.uk

HCC VERDICT

May the force-cancelling be with you





ROCCAT KAVE SURROUND SOUND HEADPHONES

Around €89.99

Designed largely for gamers, the Kave headphones take power from a PC's USB socket, and connect to the 5.1 outputs of a multichannel sound card. There are four 20-20,000Hz speakers in each ear cup, plus a 20-100Hz vibration unit to give you a real sense of bass response.

Features include movie and games modes, a desktop channel level control, 3.4m cable, detachable microphone with muting function, padded headband and foldable design.

www.roccat.org

HCC VERDICT

Enjoy surround sound without waking the neighbours

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SONY SMP-N100 NETWORK MEDIA PLAYER

£120

Smart TV is elbowing its way into the living room in many guises. This network media player from Sony allows instant online access to the Bravia Internet Video platform with YouTube, catch-up TV services and movies. Built-in Wi-Fi and DLNA compatibility enables you to stream a wide range of audio and video content from a PC to your TV, and it can all be controlled using free apps for the iPhone/iPod Touch and Android-based devices.

www.sony.co.uk

HCC VERDICT

Smart TV is on a slow burner, which is probably the best burner for it

HI FI RACKS FURNITURE

From £199

Rutland-based Hi Fi Racks has introduced the Podium XL Range, designed to house AV components and a flatscreen TV. Each piece of furniture is hand-crafted from top quality oak and can be tailored to a customer's specific requirements. Finished with a clear satin lacquer glaze, it takes four weeks to make and deliver, with a 100 per cent satisfaction guarantee. The plinths are made from 40mm dense solid oak with 46mm solid oak removable legs. Each leg comes with a 10mm thick high tensile steel connection rod, and isolating spiked feet.

www.hifiracks.co.uk

HCC VERDICT

Purposeful, practical, and desirable

AVATAR COLLECTOR'S VAULT

Approx £35

A 2D companion book to the highest grossing movie of all time wouldn't be right for the dimensionally endowed sci-fi epic, hence the publication of this 96-page oversized 3D hardback guide to Pandora.

Phrases such as 'frame sequential' and 'side-by-side' are as alien as the Na'vi language, because a pair of simple anaglyphic 3D specs are all that's needed to enjoy a journey though the stunning terrain of Pandora. Presented in a slipcase, with a pair of red and green glasses, James Cameron's *Avatar Collector's Vault* is packed with exclusive photos, and includes over 60 special features and removable pieces.

www.titanbooks.com

HCC VERDICT

Who said anaglyphic specs were dead?



Clips...

Small items that will make a big difference to your system

One For All SmartControl

From £50



This universal remote can now control Sony PlayStation 3 consoles as well as up to six other gadgets. Available as a bundle with a Bluetooth adapter, the handset can control the console's Blu-ray deck without the need to swap remotes or use a controller.
www.oneforall.com

Crystal Acoustics Energy Saver socket

£24



This clever clogs of a socket learns the total standby load for all devices connected to it so it can automatically turn everything off, reducing consumption by up to 30 per cent. Quickly pressing any remote control will turn each device back on.
www.crystalaudiovideo.com

Ixos XFT18 HDMI cable

£20



Often the weakest link in a home cinema setup, it pays to splash out on decent quality cables. Fully rated for HDMI v1.4a devices, the 1.5m XFT18 can handle 3D video, control signals, audio return, and Ethernet.
www.ixos.co.uk

Marantz Wizz App

Free



This free iPod Touch/iPhone application lets you control the Marantz SR7005 AV receiver's functions, including those for internet radio and any connected NAS drives. More Marantz devices will be added in due course.
www.marantz.com

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Home is where your system is

TECHNOLOGY AT THE HEART OF YOUR HOME!

The opportunities for a technologically up-to-date home have never been greater or more cost-effective than today. Listening to music through a good quality system has long been recognised as one of the most beneficial activities we can indulge in to help us relax, especially after a stressful day. However, we now have home cinema systems with incredible picture and sound quality available to us, that can provide a very different form of relaxation through a nail-biting adrenalin rush or laugh-a-minute humour. We can access many hundreds of internet radio stations, stream music from computer hard-drives, or have full 3D Blu-ray High Definition films delivered onto large plasma, LCD or LED TV screens, or even have that true cinema experience with a projector and screen.



For many people, the choice is so great that it can be a daunting task to even make a start. Asking a 'tekkie' friend or two might be helpful but, unless they possess professional knowledge, it is only likely to give you a small part of the picture. Going to a large multiple store for advice is also very unlikely to be fruitful as the average level of knowledge among such store staff is mediocre at best. That is why an independent group of specialist stores have got together to help make people aware of their skills and expertise. All of the TOP20UK dealer grouping are carefully selected stores with exceptional knowledge to specify, supply and install home control and home entertainment systems, from budget through to state-of-the-art whole-house super systems. These specialist stores represent the best in the industry and have been chosen because they are known to have the necessary expertise.

A technological world at your fingertips

Modern whole-house systems often now include home control systems that can integrate, for example, CCTV security, electric gates, lighting, and powered curtains or blinds by means of custom-programmed wall pads, touch-screen remote controls or movement detectors. Home entertainment systems can include home cinema, music distribution and internet networking. To specify a cohesive and comprehensive solution to meet an individual client's requirements requires considerable up-to-date product knowledge, both in terms of general market availability, standard of performance, functionality and reliability but also the ability to make all the different products work together seamlessly.

Achieving full potential

The TOP20UK dealers often work closely with architects, developers and builders as well as individual clients and can advise on all the available options. Loudspeaker options alone include invisible plastered-over speakers, artwork-finished speakers, wall-mounted, floor-standing or in-ceiling models. Part of the art of a good specifier and installer is to ensure all the right cables are discreetly installed in the right locations for full-functionality and to cover future upgrades as technology continues to advance. Although there are many individual 'installers' and businesses offering these type of services, the genuine experts in this field are few and far between. Many new home or major refurbishment projects undertaken by specialist dealers often take many months to come to full fruition, for the capability is built into the house during construction. Single-room home cinema systems are much quicker and simpler to complete, but the level of performance is greatly dependent on the installation as positioning and setting-up can make a huge difference. A high-quality home cinema system is not a suitable DIY project as the majority of systems selected and installed on this basis (that is without professional input) perform way below their optimum level.

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> "...the majority of home cinema systems selected and installed on a DIY basis (that is without professional input) are performing at way below their optimum level."

Understanding your options

Although a great sound system is important for good home cinema, a high quality hi-fi system in the home is still a 'must have' for music lovers, whether listening to classical, heavy rock, country, or popular radio stations. The iPod has become a very common method of storage and delivery but, unfortunately, most people using them download their selection at a very low quality level. The MP3 format was designed for use when download speeds were very slow and storage (memory) was expensive. That's all changed but the most popular download speed is still128Kbps, which is about one-eleventh of CD quality. Play this through a decent hi-fi system and all you get is a very poor quality sound made louder. The incorporation of a really good music system into a multi-room home entertainment system is another specialist skill that the TOP20UK dealers have in their armoury. They will ensure that a wide range of inputs, such as CD, radio, music servers, or even iPod docks are catered for, together with ease of use, which is crucial to the level of enjoyment.

Getting the best deal

So if you are thinking of purchasing any part of the range of home entertainment equipment available that will help make your home a richly rewarding environment to inhabit, the best place to start is not with WHAT but WHERE. Find a dealer who falls into the expert category, one who can provide the specialist knowledge required to get it right first time. There's no better place to start than the TOP20UK dealers listed on the right.

LISTED BELOW ARE 20 OF THE BEST AV SHOPS IN THE COUNTRY.

They have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards home cinema systems that will provide years of superlative performance and total satisfaction.

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SERVICE	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
FACILITIES	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
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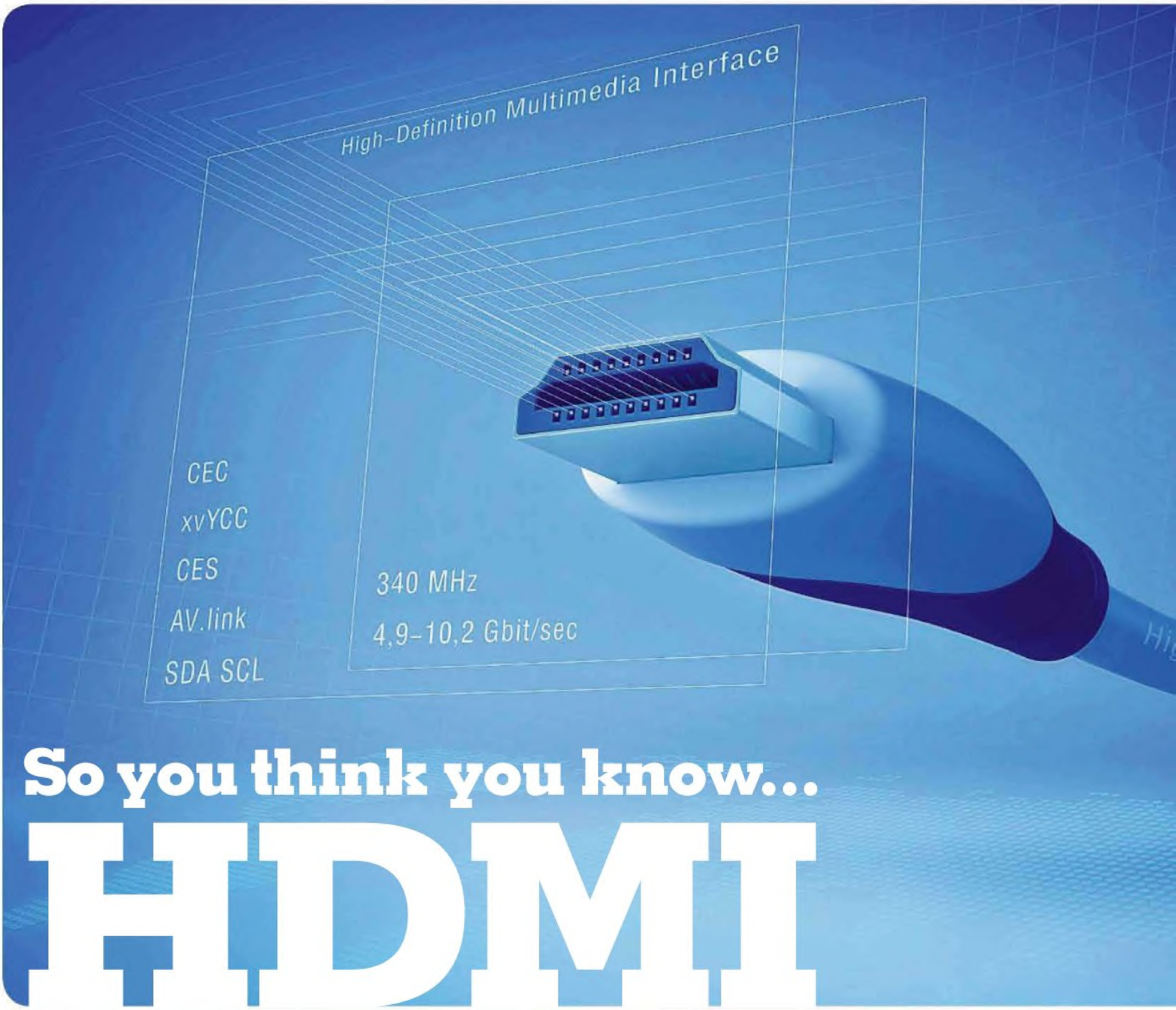
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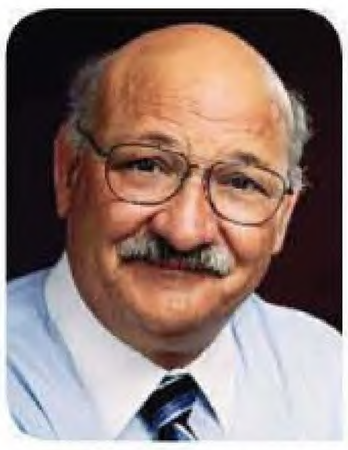
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So you think you know... HDMI

Do you think HDMI is the perfect connection format? Think again, says **Chris Jenkins**



Jeff Boccaccio: DPL guru says many HDMI problems are not down to HD video

HDMI, the High Definition Multimedia Interface, was planned as the solution to all our hi-def interconnection problems; a single cable to carry high-definition video, high quality multichannel audio, and control codes. The whole AV industry agreed on the standard, and manufacturers adopted it with enthusiasm. So what could possibly go wrong?

Lots of customers could answer that, as connection problems, hardware incompatibilities and confusing upgrades have blighted the progress of HDMI. The latest version, 1.4, was announced in March 2010 and is now commonly found on Blu-ray players and AV amplifiers, but will it finally solve our problems?

It's a myth that as HDMI cables carry digital data in the form of a stream of 0s and 1s, they will all function flawlessly, all the time, regardless of cost or construction. In fact, when you mix-and-match HDMI source devices, cables, accessories and displays from different manufacturers, it's almost certain that you'll hit trouble; and with the complex digital nature of HDMI, it can be impossible for consumers to resolve the issues.

Jeff Boccaccio's Florida-based company DPL Labs (www.dplrating.org) runs the Digital Performance Level program, intended to help manufacturers, retailers and customers test and rate HDMI products.

'HDMI requires a completely new set of rules

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THE HISTORY OF HDMI

The 'HDMI Founders' – Hitachi, Matsushita, Philips, Silicon Image, Sony, RCA/Thomson and Toshiba – designed the standard to be compatible with digital video standard DVI, and to incorporate audio, control, and, at the bidding of content providers such as Fox, Universal, Warner and Disney, the content protection system HDCP (High Bandwidth Digital Content Protection).

HDMI v1.0, introduced in 2003, was superseded in turn by v1.2 and v1.3 with various minor revisions affecting timing requirements and data transfer structures.

Now the HDMI licensing agency has launched Version 1.4. The main additions are bi-directional communication allowing networking capabilities with Ethernet devices, and upstream audio transmissions.

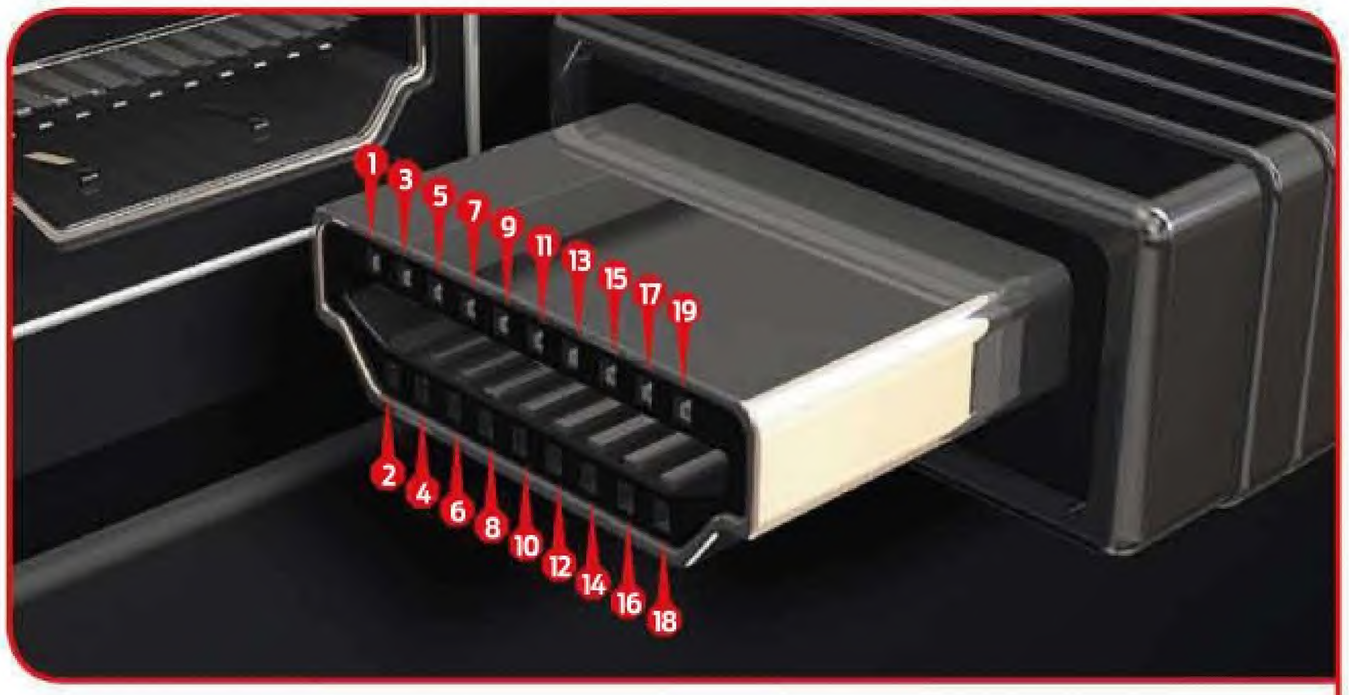
Using an HDMI Ethernet Channel (HEC), data transfers of up to 100Mbps are supported between compatible connected devices – so, for instance, a broadband-connected television could use its HEC-enabled HDMI port to provide internet connection sharing with another HEC-enabled device.

The Audio Return Channel (ARC) allows broadcast audio to be streamed back to an external amplifier for processing, eliminating the need for an extra S/PDIF cable in cases where HDTVs are directly receiving audio and video content.

Other additions are Automatic Content Enhancement (ACE), which supports future 3D video standards up to dual-stream 1080p resolution; increased resolution support up to 4,096 x 2,160 pixels at up to 30Hz; expanded support for colour spaces designed for digital cameras, such as Adobe RGB and AdobeYCC601; and content recognition which can automatically optimise a TV's picture settings based on content type.

Also available will be a Micro HDMI 19-pin connector half the size of the current HDMI plug for portable devices up to 1080p.

HDMI v1.4-compatible Blu-ray players, AV amplifiers, TVs and cables are now available, but just to confuse things further, the HDMI Licensing Committee has forbidden licensees to refer to HDMI version numbers in labelling, packaging, or promotion of any cable product. New labelling requirements refer to five cable types with different capabilities and performance characteristics; Standard, Standard with Ethernet, Standard Automotive, High Speed and High Speed with Ethernet.



HDMI pin connections (male connector pins)

1: TMDS Channel 2+
2: TMDS Channel 2 Ground
3: TMDS Channel 2-
4: TMS Channel 1+
5: TMDS Channel 1 Ground
6: TMDS Channel 1-
7: TMDS Channel 0+
8: TMDS Channel 0 Ground
9: TMDS Channel 0-
10: TMDS Clock +
11: TMDS Clock Ground
12: TMDS Clock-
13: CEC
14: HEC/Ethernet data
15: DDC clock
16: DDC data
17: DDC/CEC/HEC Ground
18: +5V Power
19: Hot Plug Detect/HEC Data+

and different techniques for success,' he says. 'We learned early on that HDMI had some reliability issues limiting its use. It was pretty obvious that while many products passed HDMI compliance testing, a high percentage were at the lower end of the performance scale.

'Even high-priced products didn't necessarily yield higher performance as the video bandwidth is so large, and dependence on control channels made the interface vulnerable.'

So what problems does HDMI regularly encounter?

'Many problems have nothing to do with high-speed video,' says Jeff. 'The majority are issues with I2C, the serial protocol used on the DDC line for EDID (Plug and Play) and HDCP (High Bandwidth Digital Content Protection). I2C is slow, but very susceptible to stray capacitance issues from connectors, cables or anything the electrical buss is connected to. If capacitance gets to a critical point, it slows the signal 'rise time' needed for proper communication. You can have all the high-speed data bandwidth in the world, but without DDC, you're dead in the water.'

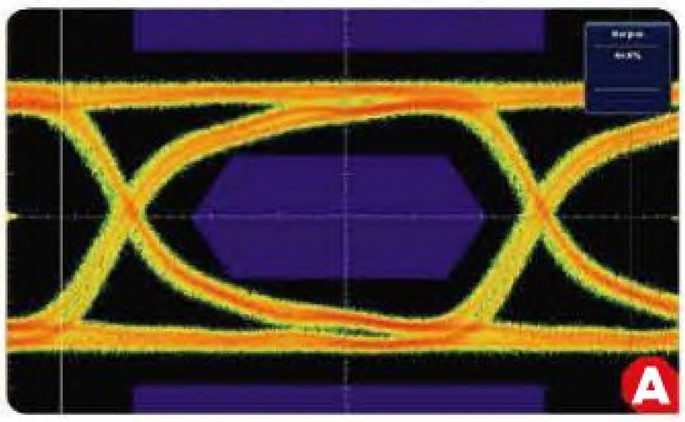
Possible results are 'Failures such as no audio, no picture, pink screen or flashing – it has nothing to do with the high-speed data lines. The video can be perfect, but if the DDC line has rise-time issues, the unit will not pass HDCP, and no picture will be displayed.'

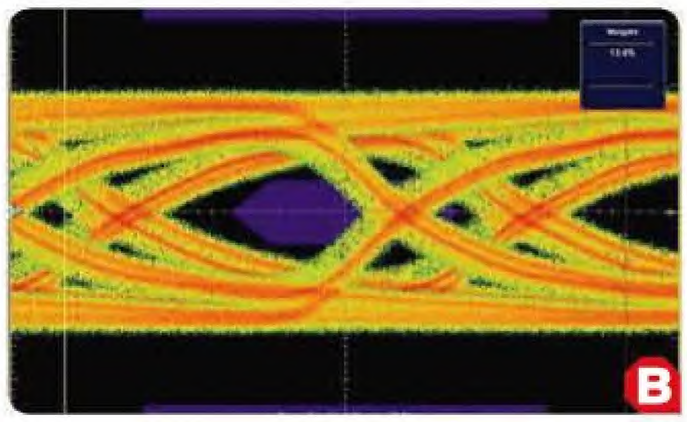
So how do you solve HDMI problems?

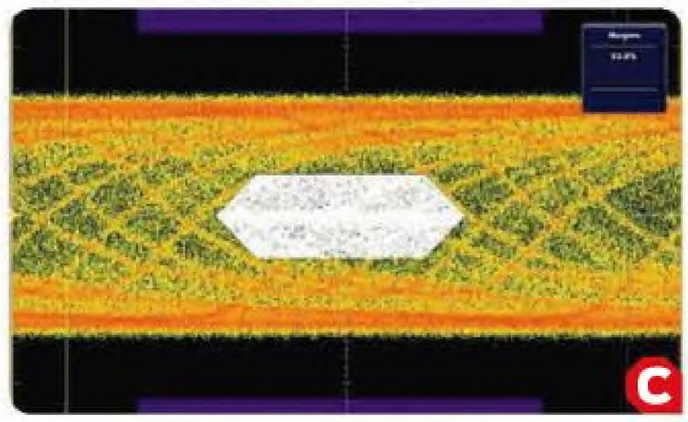
'When you need to troubleshoot, the best tool of all is the old noggin,' says Jeff. 'Once you have a solid understanding of the system, it becomes pretty easy. Shut everything down, restart the system with the connections in place, and watch the screen. If you see a notification of resolution, chances are the DDC line has communicated between source and destination. This is good! If you're using an active product like a cable box or satellite

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THE EYE PATTERN

So if some HDMI products are better than others, why not just test them and publish the results? Easier said than done; the digital analysis equipment needed costs something like $250,000, enough to make even the most dedicated manufacturer blanch.

Digital signal loss is measured by Bit Transition Analysis, familiarly shown as the 'Eye Pattern'.

This shows the wavefront of digital signals as they change from 0 to 1. If the 'eye' shape is sharp and clean, so is the signal. Timing and interference problems show up as blurring of the eye pattern; the more blurred it is, the less reliable the signal.

Some TVs incorporate correction circuitry to eliminate lesser problems; if they don't, or the problem grows worse, the result is picture noise similar to analogue 'snow', errors in sound and picture sync, and finally, complete loss of signal. Unlike an analogue signal, which will still get through no matter how distorted, after a certain point where HDCP 'handshaking' protocols break down, digital signals just give up, and the display will deactivate. HDCP needs to be refreshed every two seconds, so it doesn't take much to disrupt it.

Figure A demonstrates an 'eye pattern' with a digital data waveform. The symmetry and clear spacing between the signal and the eye mask (the solid blue hexagon) makes it clear that this is a good signal with a high 'mask margin'.

Touching the mask, known as 'kissing the dirt,' is where bit errors start to occur, causing sporadic sparkles on the screen. **Figure B** shows closure on the leading edge due to signal degradation within the source or cable; and in **Figure C,** the signal is so degraded as to be useless.

box, try a DVD player instead. If the picture goes off when you think the program should have started, HDCP is not getting the proper key. This can be a cable or hardware issue. Try shorter cable or another brand.

'Sparkles on black areas say you have a video data transmission problem, in most cases cable related. Shortening will improve integrity greatly. You could also add cable EQ to the system.

'Flashes, no audio, or pink screen are usually caused by a bad DDC line. You have to eliminate all the good things to find the bad. Power up the system with all the HDMI cables connected, then try with shorter cables to see if the system works at all. If the system still fails to come on, use different inputs. Stray capacitance may be inherent in the hardware, so try a DDC line conditioner which can eliminate a lot of problems.

'If the picture comes on, then goes off, it's likely one of the video TMDS channels has a high bit error rate. Many times the picture comes back with tear lines through it. The second case is that the DDC line is just not quite making it, and HDCP is not getting a new refresh key. Here, replace the cable or make it shorter. If all else fails, again try conditioning.'

'Cable testers check only for continuity, but there are some useful testers with status LEDs for power, hotplug detect, and DDC lines'.

'Kill the cat!'

Another possible source of HDMI problems is the +5V power line used to power the display's DDC communication circuitry when it's turned off. If this power supply is weakened, communication problems can occur. Some HDMI switchers, splitters and LED-illuminating cables take their power from this line, which is asking for trouble.

HDMI Pin 19, the Hot Plug Detect, is 50 per cent shorter than the others, so tends to be the first to disconnect if the HDMI plug is loose. Bear in mind too that HDMI cables don't like being bent – signal timing is critical, so twists and turns can degrade performance, particularly over long distances.

HDMI performance can also vary between different connections that are on the same device; often, due to quirks of circuit board design, one HDMI socket on a TV offers inferior performance to another.

The latest HDMI issues involve 3D. An HDMI v1.3 system should carry 3D video; but HDMI v1.3 amplifiers won't pass 3D EDID information to a display. One solution is to have a Blu-ray player equipped with two HDMI outputs, one with v1.4 to connect directly to the display, the other with v1.3 to transmit sound to the amplifier.

Some early HDMI-equipped receivers had the HDMI board shoe-horned in near the transformer; as the device heated up, HDMI performance became glitchy. Jeff tells us of one home cinema fan whose HDMI system failed regularly. No-one could identify the problem until an engineer realised that the family cat was sleeping on the amplifier, blocking the cooling fan, and the amp's HDMI board was overheating. And Jeff's solution? 'Kill the cat!'

So take comfort from the fact that if you've had HDMI problems, you're not alone; take our tips to heart, and you should be able to get it to perform perfectly, as its designers intended...



How much for quality?

How much should you have to pay for an HDMI cable? The free one you got boxed with your Blu-ray player is probably the cheapest the manufacturer could source. Used to connect your player directly to your TV, it will probably be fine; but for longer distances or for more complex setups, you're asking for trouble.

Fortunately, many manufacturers now recognise the need for affordable, good quality HDMI cables. Peerless has a good range of upgrades, from the Alpha at £18 for 1m, to the Omega with zinc alloy headshell, silver soldering and additional clip-on RFI/EMI filter at £130 for 1m.

The Chord SuperShield High Speed HDMI cable with Ethernet is available in 1, 2 and 3m lengths, costing £50, £60, and £70 respectively, while the IXOS XFT18 high-speed HDMI cable with Ethernet costs £20 for 1.5m or £25 for 3m.

Profigold's PROL1201 High Speed HDMI Cable with Ethernet costs £50 for 1m, or £60 for 2m, and Lindy has slimline high-speed HDMI cables ranging from £3.25 for 0.5m to £4.50 for 3m. At the top of the Lindy range is a 20m Premium Gold HDMI 1.4 cable, with a full metal connector and a 25-year guarantee, costing £190.

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PLAYBACK

→Software highlights **INCEPTION** The heist movie with a brain **THE EXPENDABLES** Perhaps the greatest ever assembly of 80s action men **TOY STORY 3** The sequel that makes grown men cry **A CHRISTMAS CAROL 3D** Scrooge story gets a scary new dimension **SCOTT PILGRIM VS THE WORLD** Michael Cera fights for his love rights **AND MUCH MORE!**

What the Dickens!

Walt Disney → All-region BD

Ebenezer Scrooge experiences a whole new world of horror. Check out our in-depth review on page 98



HCC Ratings key

Buzz Lightyear	1 2 3 4 5
He-man	1 2 3 4 5
Bionic man	1 2 3 4 5
Action Man	1 2 3 4 5
Barbie	1 2 3 4 5

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Nolan plays mind games



Inception is literally a dream of a disc you'll want to spin time and again





HCC VERDICT

Inception → Warner Home Video → All-region BD → £29 Approx

We say: *Inception* is brain-bendingly brilliant. A must-buy

Picture: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Sound: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Extras: 1 2 **3** 4 5
Movie: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Overall: 1 2 3 4 **5**

Inception is that rare commodity: an overblown blockbuster that glowers into the face of its audience and dares them to keep up. It's worth making the effort. Chris Nolan's cerebral heist movie delivers more digital wow than (nearly) every other film released in 2010. The only question is which version you should buy: the Triple Play release (two Blu-ray discs, one DVD and the keys to a Digital Copy download), or geek out with the stainless steel Briefcase Edition? This includes a replica of Cobb's spinning top token, a PASIV (Portable Automated Somnacin IntraVenous) Device User Manual plus Movie art.

Chris Jenkins on picture: You're not dreaming, *Inception* isn't razor sharp, but I'm guessing it looks exactly the way Nolan and his cinematographer, Wally Pfister, want it to look. There's obvious film grain in the 2.35:1 VC-1 1080p encode, but there's also plenty of old-fashioned cinematic depth and texture. The film lacks that shiny CG gloss so prevalent now – presumably because many of its most memorable scenes are shot in-camera with physical effects – but it's all the better for it. Often the beauty of the image comes from the details: browse Chapter 7 (the freight train sequence) and savour the driving rain and the complex shadows and textures within the Yellow Taxi.

Mark Craven on audio: *Inception* has arguably the best sounding Blu-ray movie soundtrack of the year. The only other film that comes close is *Avatar*. The 5.1 DTS-HD MA is astoundingly dynamic. The freight train sequence (referenced above) is also an aural standout. The unexpected jolting as the train collides, and then the pitter-patter of gunfire make for a perfect home cinema demo sequence. Nolan's long-time collaborator Hans Zimmer also hits a home run with his score. The insistent, pulsing rhythms add an urgent, visceral excitement to the movie.

Anton van Beek on extras: Play *Inception* in Extraction mode, and the disc branches out to copious behind-the-scenes featurettes. These info bursts are genuinely interesting. All the key scenes in the film have an accompanying module and they can be viewed separately if you prefer.

All the other extras are relegated to the second disc. The biggest of these is also the one most likely to put you to sleep. *Dreams: Cinema of the Subconscious* features talking heads who gas on about Freud's dream theory, REM sleep and so on. There are contributions from Nolan and DiCaprio, but this is not something you'll want to revisit too often. The short online motion comic *Inception: The Cobol Job* is better. This sets up the story, but could be a bit of a spoiler. Equally welcome is a standalone 10-track 5.1 soundtrack. Having Hans Zimmer's excellent contribution bundled this way is a treat; the tracks play back sans visuals.

Finally we get the BD Live enabled *Project Somnacin: Confidential Files* (which wasn't live when we dropped by), plus three teaser trailers and multiple TV spots. There's also some snazzy production and concept art. A good, if not outstanding, package.

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Lethal Weapon Collection

Warner Home Video → All-region BD
£45 Approx



Warner makes amends for the disappointing standalone BD releases of the first two films with this excellent five-disc boxset. Each movie features a VC-1 1080p encode (1.85:1 for the first, 2.35:1 for the others), and the jump in quality for the first two films is obvious, with both looking considerably sharper and less noisy. The third and fourth look even better, as you'd expect from more recent productions. In addition to DTS-HD MA 5.1 mixes, the four films also come with audio commentaries and additional scenes. ***MC***

1 2 3 **4** 5

The Karate Kid: Double Play

Sony Pictures → All-region BD/R2 DVD → £25 Approx



Though it offers little new and feels a touch overlong at 140 minutes, this remake of the popular '80s flick is surprisingly entertaining. Jaden Smith and Jackie Chan bring depth to their student-mentor relationship and the story's effective emotional core keeps things ticking over nicely between the well-choreographed action scenes. The Blu-ray itself kicks plenty of ass with a pristine AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode and hugely involving, yet always balanced, DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix. A fair selection of extras include MovieIQ and 20min *Making of...* ***MC***

1 2 3 **4** 5

The Twilight Saga: Eclipse

E1 Entertainment → Region B BD → £25 Approx



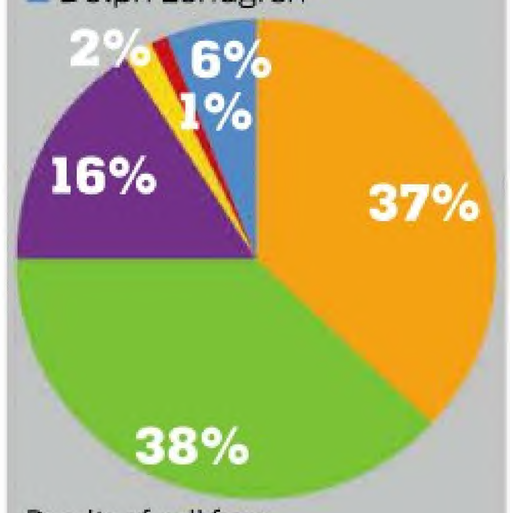
An incremental improvement over its two predecessors, this third part in the tweenage vampire saga definitely benefits from the guiding hand of director David Slade. The *30 Days of Night*-helmer brings a bit of much needed danger to the film, climaxing in an energetic scrap between a werewolf-vampire alliance and an army of newborn undead. What a pity then that Bella remains such a whiny, unlikeable lead, making the 105mins leading up to the action so infuriating. On Blu-ray, *Eclipse* benefits from a vivid AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode. ***AvB***

1 2 **3** 4 5

We asked you...

Who is your favourite 'Expendable'?

- Sly Stallone
- Jason Statham
- Jet Li
- Randy Couture
- Terry Crews
- Dolph Lundgren



Results of poll from www.homecinemachoice.com

'The job's real and the money's real'

Kick-ass action from the maestros of ass kicking will make your black levels sweat

The Expendables is wish fulfilment for fans of '80s action movies. The plot is little better than most Direct-to-DVD fodder (blow up some foreigners, save the girl), but it's packed with memorably staged fights, shootouts and explosions. Its roster of testosterone-fuelled talent includes Sylvester Stallone (who also wrote and directed), Jason Statham, Jet Li, Dolph Lundgren, Randy Couture, Terry Crews, Mickey Rourke, Steve Austin, Gary Daniels, Eric Roberts and even fun cameos by Bruce Willis and the Governator himself, Arnold Schwarzenegger!



Nobody's too old to trampoline



Chris Jenkins: Like its leading men, nobody could accuse this movie of being particularly good looking, but it gets the job done. Lionsgate's AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode does its best with the material, but don't expect too much in the way of hi-def eye candy. The biggest issue is that it's an incredibly dark film. Couple that with confined, smoke-filled locations and the imagery tends to lack sharpness. More positively, the ever-present blacks are rock solid and, during the few daylight sequences, the encode serves up impressive fine detail and a robust colour palette.



Mark Craven: Sly's latest action extravaganza hits Blu-ray with a bombastic DTS-HD MA 7.1. The final act (Chapters 13-15) really stands out, thanks to its seemingly endless run of action where every punch and kick is accompanied by bone-breaking, room-shaking bass, while precise gunfire and explosions make full use of the soundstage. If there's one niggle, it's that some of Stallone's mumbled dialogue can be difficult to make out, but I found the exact same problem with the cinema release.

Anton van Beek: This limited edition steelbook includes a bonus DVD housing the exceptional in-depth 88min documentary *Inferno: The Making of The Expendables*. Headlining the Blu-ray platter is a commentary by Stallone that works far better when large parts of it are re-used by the disc's standout feature – Ultimate Recon Mode. Another take on the Maximum Movie Mode, this enthralling extra mixes Sly's commentary with Picture-in-Picture, behind-the-scenes footage and seamless branching to interviews with cast and crew. Also included on the disc is a 27min post-production documentary, gag reel, deleted scene, trailer, two TV spots, poster gallery, D-Box Motion Code and BD Live Facebook/Twitter integration.



HCC VERDICT

The Expendables: Bullet Proof LE → Lionsgate → Regions B BD/ R2 DVD → £30 Approx

We say: Pick up this edition fast

Picture: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Sound: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Extras: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Movie: 1 2 3 **4** 5

Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

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Dangerous redhead presses all the right buttons

Oh joy! Toys really are us

Managing to avoid franchise over-kill, *Toy Story 3* is more delightful than ever



Toy Story 3 is possibly the year's most surprising film. Given the narratives and themes explored so brilliantly by its two predecessors, it's hard to imagine any new ground or fresh ideas that could be tapped into. And yet, thanks to the brilliance of the creative minds at Pixar, what could have been little more than a crass exercise in financially-motivated filmmaking has emerged as the most exciting and touching film since... the last Pixar movie, and one of the year's best films.

Chris Jenkins: With its spectacular digital-to-digital transfer, it hardly a surprise that *Toy Story 3*'s AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode joins such previous Pixar animations as *Wall-E* and *Up* in delivering some of the very best high-definition imagery.

Even when projected onto a 100in+ screen, it's next to impossible to find fault with the film's insanely detailed and remarkably rich computer-generated visuals. If I'm being extremely nit-picky, there are a couple of instances of aliasing that become evident when blown up to this size, but the picture quality is still leaps and bounds ahead of 99 per cent of other discs on the market.

Mark Craven: *Toy Story 3* made waves on its theatrical release as the first major Hollywood film to be mixed completely in Dolby's Surround 7.1 cinema audio format. The quality and precision of that enhanced surround mix is perfectly realised on this Blu-ray release, albeit on a DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundtrack. Right from the opening sequence, the mix delights with its sharp vocals, precise fidelity, expansive bass, and the scale of the audio created by the enhanced positional effects and steering from the extra rear channels. Trust me when I say that this is one disc that speaker and AVR manufacturers will be using to demonstrate their systems for years to come.

Anton van Beek: This Triple Play edition offers no fewer than four discs – two Blu-ray platters, plus a DVD and Digital Copy of the flick. Unsurprisingly, it doesn't exactly skimp on bonus features, either.

There's not much on the first Blu-ray disc beyond the film, just the *Day & Night* short that accompanied it at cinemas, a new Buzz Lightyear Mission Log and a chat with the animators about creating all of the new characters. If you're wondering about commentaries, for that you have to go to the second disc, where you'll find a Cine-Explore picture-in-picture presentation of the film with a commentary by director Lee Unkrich and producer Darla K Anderson, plus an alternate (rather more techy) audio commentary from the entire animation team.

Also included on this disc are various behind-the-scenes featurettes covering both *Toy Story 3* and *Day & Night*, the epilogue presented without scrolling credits, a BD-Live trivia game, countless promotional clips and trailers, and a whole lot more.





HCC VERDICT

Toy Story 3: Triple Play →
Walt Disney
Region B BD/R2 DVD →
£26 Approx

We say: Another Pixar modern classic and must-own BD package. Need we say more?

Picture: 1 2 3 4 5
Sound: 1 2 3 4 5
Extras: 1 2 3 4 5
Movie: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

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Monster House 3D

Sony Pictures → All-region BD
£25 Approx



This spooky slice of family fun benefits from a revisit on 3D Blu-ray. While there is occasional ghosting, it's not that distracting, and on the whole the MVC 2.40:1 encode makes the most of the playful image depth used by the animators. Complementing this is a magnificent DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix (replacing the uncompressed PCM 5.1 mix from the 2D release) that makes aggressive use of the entire soundstage. Extras include a commentary; seven-part Making of... doc; seven-part scene deconstruction; three art galleries and 3D clips from *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* and *Open Season*. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

Open Season 3D

Sony Pictures → All-region BD
£25 Approx



There's no shortage of stunning 3D imagery on this Blu-ray disc. Indeed, the detailing and colour reproduction is so strong across all planes of depth, and the MVC 1.78:1 1080p encode so flawless, that it makes a case for Open Season being our default 3D demo disc. What a pity that is so utterly charmless, making it quite the chore to sit through. The disc also serves up an eventful DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix and a fair array of bonus goodies including a commentary, two short featurettes, a spin-off short animation (in HD) and a 3D excerpt from *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*. **MC**

1 2 3 4 5

Step Up 3D

Universal Pictures. → All-region BD
£30 Approx



Street dance leaps into the third dimension with this release. While the film is awful, it is our first look at a live-action full HD 3D Blu-ray title. And the disc's MVC 1.78:1 1080p encode really delivers; eye-popping 3D dance sequences demonstrate the format's power as do some cute out-of-the-screen tricks, such as bubbles, balloons and splashing water. A lively DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix showcases the music tracks as well as general ambient effects. It includes a pristine AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode, which may explain why extras are limited to eight 480p music videos. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

Fantasia: 2 Movie Collection

Walt Disney → All-region BD → £28 Approx



Disney continues its impressive treatment of its classic Blu-ray animation with the 1940 masterpiece and its sequel *Fantasia 2000*. Both 1080p encodes (AVC 1.33:1 and AVC 1.78:1 respectively) in this two disc package are breathtaking in sharpness, clarity and colour fidelity. The DTS-HD MA 7.1 mixes are also sensational and easily the best each version has ever sounded in the home. Extras are decent for both, including commentaries and the Dali-inspired short *Destino* (in HD) and accompanying 82 minute documentary, *Dali and Disney*. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

Disney offsets Dickens' tale in cool 3D

Carrey's Christmas-hating miser is worth donning silly spex for on this flight of fancy



A Christmas Carol's triple disc set contains two Blu-rays: one 3D, the other 2D. Given that the 3D BD specification is backwardly compatible, this decision to issue separate discs seems profligate. The third platter is a Digital Copy disc.

Chris Jenkins: Picture quality on both Blu-rays is deep, crisp and even. The clarity of the CG rendering is outstanding, but to see it at its best you'll need to view the 2D version. Here the quasi-photorealistic world of Dickens' London has an undeniable beauty. The exquisite textures and subtlety in the rendering are compromised in 3D, thanks to a combination of crosstalk effects (from the TV) and increased dimness (from the glasses). That said, of the admittedly few 3D Blu-rays to break cover this year, this is one of the most enjoyable. The CG really allows Zemekis to play with parallax. The opening sequence which flies us over London through a snow storm is exhilarating, and when the hellish steed of the ghost of Christmas yet to come glowers into your face, it's enough to boggle your mince pies.

Mark Craven: Sonically, this disc is a Christmas cracker. Scrooge's spectral apparitions gain fearsome solidity from the 5.1 DTS HD Master Audio mix, particularly the ghost of Jacob Marley, who returns weighed down with clanking chains wrapped around thwumping cash-boxes. When Scrooge is miniaturised during his flight from the Grim Reaper (surely a sequence devised purely to justify a theme park ride), the sound design leaves you deliciously giddy. Alan Silvestri's score is less imaginative, primarily because he deliberately draws on all manner of seasonal influences. The result is an effective, if somewhat generic, score.



He could have your eye out with that 3D conk





HCC VERDICT

A Christmas Carol: 3D Super Play → Walt Disney → All-region BD → £30 Approx

We say: Works its 3D schtick well

Picture: 1 2 3 4 5
Sound: 1 2 3 4 5
Extras: 1 2 3 4 5
Movie: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

Anton van Beek: Scrooge's supplementals are as light and fluffy as freshly fallen snow. The 3D disc offers (logically) three dimensional extras. Keep your glasses on for both the *Making Of Scrooge's Wild Ride* and *Sneek Peak*. Flip to the 2D edition, and the highlight is *Capturing Dickens*. There's also the self-explanatory *On set with Sammi* (Hanratty, a young actress who performs several characters), some deleted scenes and an 'interactive' Advent calendar. Don't get too excited about the *Discover Blu-Ray 3D With Timon and Pumbaa* short, though. We couldn't make out who this clunky infomercial was aimed at. >

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The axeman cometh

Comic book cool meets pop culture in this romcom with a twist



Scott Pilgrim vs The World is a tough film to pin down. Adapted from Bryan Lee O'Malley's 6-volume comic book series and directed by Edgar 'Shaun of the Dead' Wright, it's a love letter to pop culture, cool music and... love.

Michael Cera excels as the self-obsessed Scott, a 20-something slacker and guitarist who falls in love with the new girl in town, only to find that's she's got even more emotional baggage than him – not least the 'Seven Evil Exes' he must battle. Full of imaginative special effects, off-kilter gags, epic fights, videogame parodies and even a musical number, Scott Pilgrim is unique and entertaining pop art cinema.

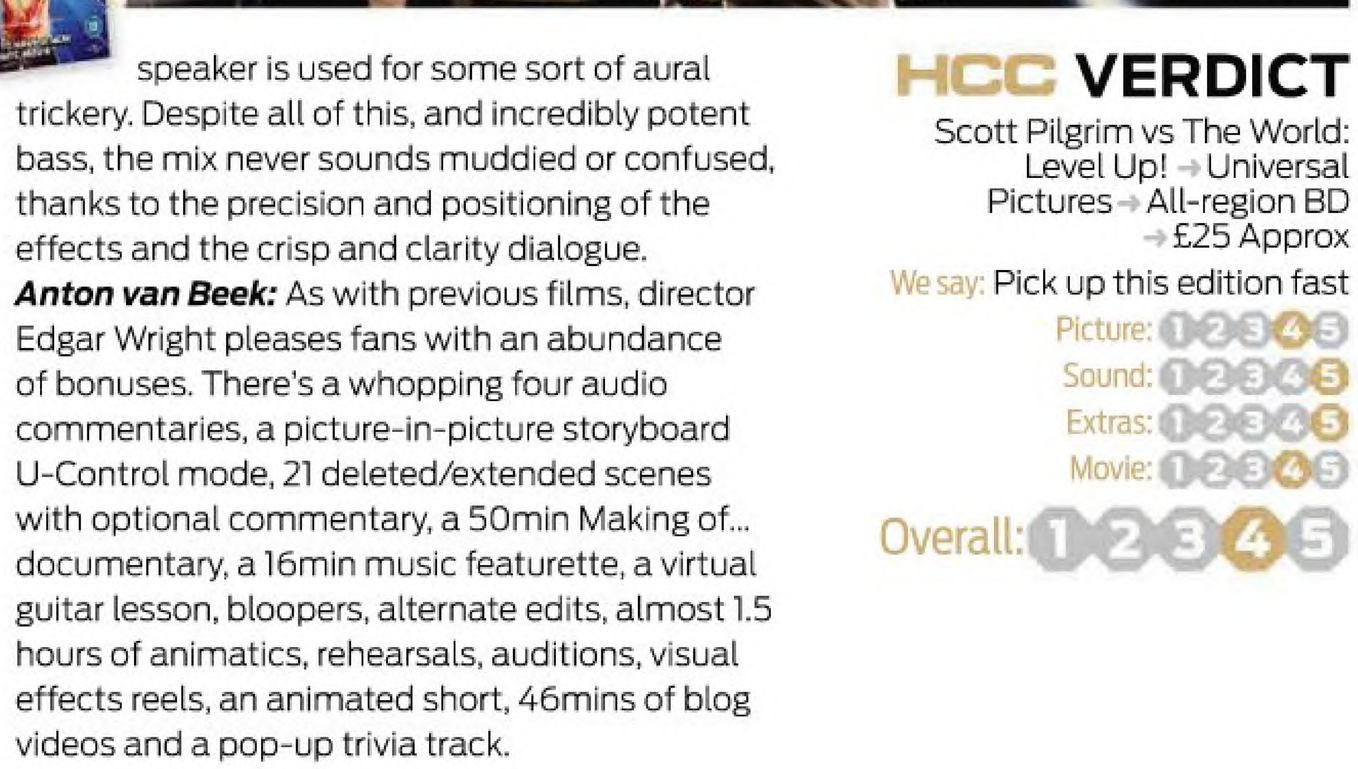
Chris Jenkins: For all its brash videogame and comic book references, its main aesthetic is that of lo-fi indie flicks; loaded with muted creams and browns coupled with diffuse lighting. It's not as vibrant as you expect, and some shots look a little soft (if intentionally so). Before anyone panics, it's worth pointing out that the AVC 1.85:1 1080p encode delivers impressive close-up detail, vibrant bold colour (such as Ramona's hair), and a grainy filmic veneer. It excels with its frantic editing and inventive visual effects without suffering from motion artefacts.





Mark Craven: While the film falls a little short in visual wow, the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is a thing of beauty. The soundtrack is as complex and inventive as the visuals ensuring that every speaker is used for some sort of aural trickery. Despite all of this, and incredibly potent bass, the mix never sounds muddied or confused, thanks to the precision and positioning of the effects and the crisp and clarity dialogue.

Anton van Beek: As with previous films, director Edgar Wright pleases fans with an abundance of bonuses. There's a whopping four audio commentaries, a picture-in-picture storyboard U-Control mode, 21 deleted/extended scenes with optional commentary, a 50min Making of... documentary, a 16min music featurette, a virtual guitar lesson, bloopers, alternate edits, almost 1.5 hours of animatics, rehearsals, auditions, visual effects reels, an animated short, 46mins of blog videos and a pop-up trivia track.



Seven evil ex-boyfriends must be confronted to win the fair lady's heart

HCC VERDICT

Scott Pilgrim vs The World: Level Up! → Universal Pictures → All-region BD → £25 Approx

We say: Pick up this edition fast

Picture: 1 2 3 **4** 5
Sound: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Extras: 1 2 3 4 **5**
Movie: 1 2 3 **4** 5

Overall: 1 2 3 **4** 5

Shogun Assassin: Ltd Edition Steelbook

Eureka → Region B BD/R2 DVD
£25 Approx



While it doesn't hold a candle to the Lone Wolf and Cub movies it cannibalised, this 85min US re-edit of the first two films is an action-packed, gore-soaked Samurai romp. The AVC 2.40:1 1080p imagery is light years ahead of all previous UK releases, with strong colours, excellent delineation and little wear. The DTS-HD MA 2.0 mono track is impressive, bringing clarity to the dubbed dialogue and groovy score. Two commentaries, a DVD copy, HD trailers, and an interview with fan Samuel L Jackson are included. ***AvB***

1 2 3 **4** 5

K-20: Legend of the Black Mask

Manga → Region ? BD
£20 Approx



This Japanese action epic mixes elements of *Batman Begins*, *V for Vendetta*, *Spider-Man* and *The Shadow* and throws it all into a universe, where World War II ended differently. But despite so much borrowing, *K-20* is an enjoyable romp with great action and charismatic leads. The AVC 2.40:1 1080p visuals are sharp and detailed, while the DTS-HD MA 5.1 Japanese language track is very energetic (although the disc defaults to a less impressive Dolby 2.0 Surround mix). A 25min *Making of...* is among extras. ***MC***

1 2 3 **4** 5

Sex and the City 2

Warner Home Video → All-region BD → £25 Approx



This awful sequel completes the transformation from fun TV show into a grotesque self-parody. For 146mins, frivolities like 'plot' are sacrificed for dressing the fab four like drag queens and packing them off to Abu Dhabi to object to foreign cultures and moan about the men in NYC. The Blu-ray's VC-1 1.78:1 1080p encode excels with the garish colour palette, but suffers from digital noise and a lack of shadow detail. The DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is more satisfying. Extras include interviews, a commentary, and featurettes. ***AvB***

1 **2** 3 4 5

Star Wars: The Clone Wars Season Two

Warner Home Video → All-region BD → £50 Approx



While it can't make amends for the live-action prequels, this spin-off is still fun. Like the first season hi-def release, this 3-disc set offers some striking VC-1 2.35:1 1080p encodes that benefit from the colourful stylised animation. There are sightings of artefacting and colour-banding, but it's less troubling than Warner's policy of presenting TV material on BD with lossy DD5.1 audio. Extras include art galleries, animations and deleted scenes, short featurettes, trailers and a 68-page production journal. ***MC***

1 2 **3** 4 5

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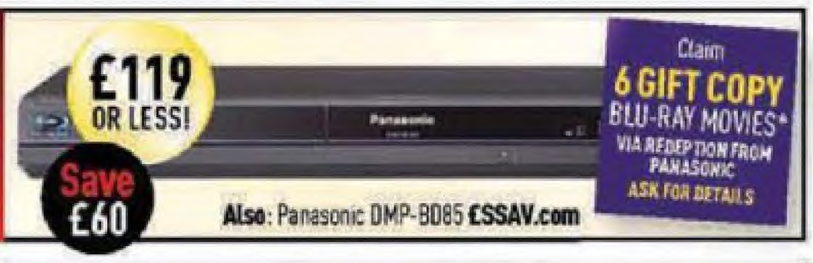
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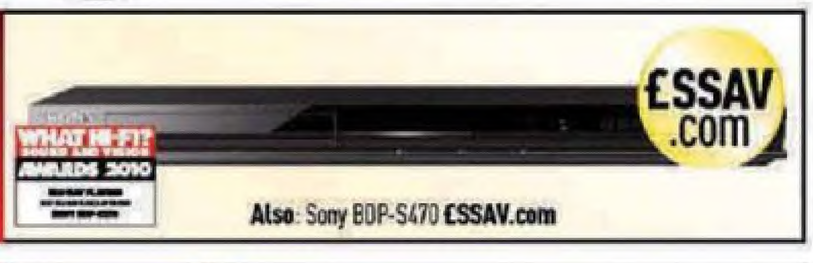


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Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Want to comment on current technology? Need to share? **HCC** is here to help

Too rich for me

Referring to your latest 'We asked...' poll and the question: 'What's the most you've ever spent on a single AV product?' – what numpty came up with a £1,001-£5,000 category? My contention is that the vast majority of people will never spend more than £2,000 on a single AV item. Your category aims to give you justification to review a load of £2,001-£5,000 wares that no one will ever buy, and hence never care about. Unless they get reduced to under £2,000. Please repeat survey with a £1,001-£2,000 category and we'll see if I'm right, and then you can tailor a majority of reviews to your target market, please.
Simon Coughlan, via email

You're probably right in saying that the £1,001-£5,000 category is too broad, but we certainly don't agree with you about £2,000+ items. For a start, quite a lot of our readers say they own a 50in Pioneer Kuro TV or JVC D-ILA projector, so they must have spent over £2,000 on a single item of kit. Secondly, a strategy of only reviewing hardware below a certain point would mean ignoring new 3DTVs from the likes of Philips, Panasonic and Samsung, LED projectors, pre-power amp combis, and more.

Buyers need more

Hi, I'm in need of surround sound (I'm defining this as speakers and an amp, but I'm a newbie and could be wrong). I have Sky+HD+, a Panasonic BD deck and a Sony 40W4500 TV.

I would like to keep my existing player and therefore need a surround sound system, comprising the amp and speakers. I didn't see any recommendations in the mag as the systems all seem to include a DVD player.

I wish to spend between £500 and £800 or so. I don't really listen to anything thunderingly loud, but I would like quality. By the way, a recommendation for a wireless streaming media thing to get films from the PC would also be helpful.
Pete, via email

Simple system: Onkyo's HT-S305 is something of an AV bargain



You've noticed that it's often easier to buy a surround sound system with integrated BD/DVD player – but as you already own an excellent deck in the shape of Panasonic's DMP-BD80, you're right to be considering a separate amp and speaker combination, as you'll get better quality.

One product you should

Star Letter

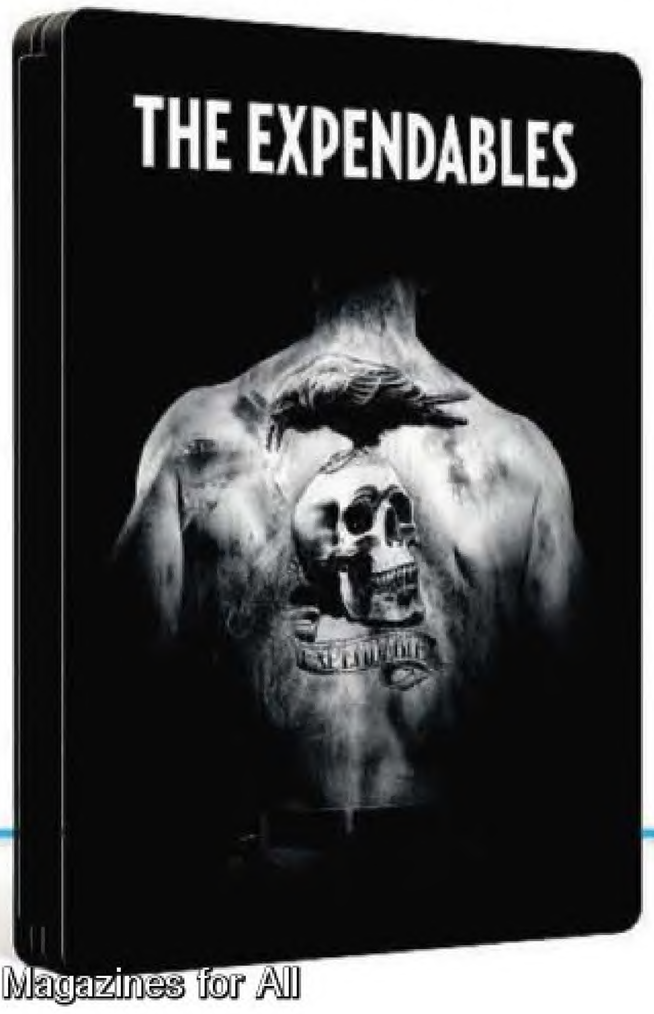
What happened to OLED?

For a few years now, I've been waiting for proper-sized OLED TVs to go on sale – but all we've had are 11in and 15in models and at extortionate prices. When will someone release a 40in OLED screen?
Adam Marshall, via email

Ah, OLED, the Holy Grail of home cinema fans and a technology that promises startling picture quality and ultra thin panels.

Like you, we've been tapping our fingers waiting for the likes of Sony, Samsung and LG to release home cinema-size OLED TVs and are still in the dark about when, if ever, they'll hit the UK. One of the problems, possibly, is that the big brands have become so adept at making their normal LED-lit LCD TVs ultra thin – such as Samsung's 9000 series – that part of OLED's appeal has diminished. Then there's the fact that they've all become distracted by 3DTV, and connected TV, and haven't got the time or the money to invest in whole new production facilities.

We expect to see new, bigger OLED screens being unveiled at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas in early January – but still don't expect to be able to waltz into Curry's in the summer and buy one.



Winner: Star Letter writer Adam Marshall wins a copy of *The Expendables*: Bullet Proof Limited Edition 3-Disc Collector's Steelbook courtesy of Lionsgate Home Entertainment. This all-action classic starring Sylvester Stallone, Jason Statham and Dolph Lundgren is out on Blu-ray (£29.99) and DVD (£19.99) on 13 December 2010.

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definitely check out is Onkyo's HT-S3305, which matches one of the brand's excellent affordable amps to a 5.1 speaker array, and even comes with colour-coded speaker cables to make setup easier for newbies such as yourself. This retails for around £350.

Other alternatives within your £800 limit would be combining an entry-level AVR from the 'Big 5' of Onkyo, Sony, Yamaha, Denon and Pioneer with a £400 speaker system. Here, you should consider such models as KEF's KHT-1005.2 or Teufel's Theater 80.

As for a media player, D-Link's DSM-510 should fit your bill, but at £150 you are paying for its wireless ability. If you can live with a wired connection, Western Digital's WDTV Live HD is about half the price.

Is 4:3 dead?

I am very dismayed to learn that the current range of widescreen TV's made by Philips and Sharp do not make provision for switching to the old 4:3 picture ratio. I believe Panasonic, Sony and Samsung still do. My concern is that these brands might also follow suit at a future date.

Most of the DVD box sets available today are mastered in 4:3. There always has been and always will be a need for the 4:3 ratio! I for one do not want to watch my DVD collection artificially pulled to the widescreen format. It looks ridiculous!

Can you please set my mind to rest over this matter? I want to feel confident that when I need to buy a widescreen TV in the future the 4:3 ratio will be present. Can anything be done to get this message across to the manufacturers?
P. Aungiers, via email

I'm not sure why you think that Philips and Sharp TVs are phasing out the 4:3 mode – they may go to 16:9 by default, but as you say, there will always be a need for a 4:3 mode, so it's just a case of switching to it manually. Certainly, though, the vast majority of TV productions in the future will be 16:9, so except for archive material, most people will be viewing 4:3 a lot less!

3D will make you sick

With the industries and tech magazines pushing 3D as much as possible as the most desirable TV to have, it is worth reading what a research scientist working on vision and 3D has to say about it (*Sunday Times*, 21 November).

'Part of my work is about why 3D movies make some people feel sick. The basic reason is that the brain has a model of how the world works, what combination of images are geometrically possible. In real life, when things get closer to you, their relationship to surrounding images changes and your eyes refocus. But when you are watching *Avatar*, your eyes don't have to refocus, and your brain says "What is going on? The image seems to be coming towards me, but my focal length says it has stayed where it is"'. She adds that giddiness and sickness result from this confusion.

When one adds to this the need to wear glasses that constantly need re-adjusting, plus the fact that it is really only spectacular movies (*Avatar* etc.) for which 3D is any kind of advantage, is it any wonder that most people I've spoken to and who have seen 3DTV/movies show almost total indifference, even hostility?
Roger Payne, via email

If we're guilty of pushing 3DTVs as the most desirable, it's because anyone buying a new flatscreen now would be foolish to not consider one, as it will help futureproof their setup. That's not to say non-3DTVs are obselete, of course, and there'll be many home cinema fans content to ignore 3D completely – until George Lucas releases the original *Star Wars* trilogy...

AVR help!

I am in the process of upgrading my Yamaha amplifier, for a new AV receiver. I have a budget of £500 and have narrowed my choice down to the following models: Sony STR-DH810, Yamaha RX-V667, Denon AVR-1911 or the Onkyo TX-SR608. My speaker system is a Tannoy Mercury MX 5.1 setup. I would be grateful if you would advise me on the model to choose or whether there is a different receiver that I haven't thought of.
Gareth Davies, via email

It's hard for us to give you a definite answer, as we don't know your room size, feature requirements, hair colour, etc, so really this is a choice you need to make yourself – ideally by having an audition of each model, as you may find you prefer the sound of one brand of AVRs over another.

The good news for you is that all four of your suggested AVRs are pretty well stocked in terms of features, and will all leave you with £100 or so from your £500 budget to spend on new, shiny Blu-rays

Write to Letters, Home Cinema Choice, Future Publishing, 2 Balcombe Street, London NW1 6NW, or email us at hcc@futurenet.co.uk
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From: £19.99

IXOS

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QED Speaker Cable



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Available in 15m mini-spools.

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£2.42/m

IXOS

Van Damme Speaker Cable



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Studio Grade Blue
From: £1.40/m

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LCD TV

Best on test...



PHILIPS
46in → 46PFL9705H
£2,500 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

Philips' debut 3DTV is worthy of its £2,500 ticket

Highs: Excellent 3D and 2D images; solid audio; interactive functions
Lows: No Freeview HD tuner

→ Specifications
HD Ready: Yes (to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (2 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: 1
Digital tuner: Yes, Freeview

Tested: Issue 189
For more info visit:
www.philips.co.uk



SONY
60in → KDL-60LX903
£3,500 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

Flagship 3D set from Sony is a real bigscreen beauty

Highs: Integrated 3D; intuitive GUI; cinematic HD pictures
Lows: Weak audio; 2D-3D quality is source-dependent

→ Specifications
Full HD: Yes (to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 1 (RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: 1
Digital tuner: Yes, Freeview HD

Tested: Issue 186
For more info visit:
www.sony.co.uk



SAMSUNG
40in → UE-40C7000
£1,800 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

Debut 3DTV stands out in other areas, too

Highs: Next-gen tech; Freeview HD tuner; app store
Lows: Fiddly control system; 3D effect needs a bigger display

→ Specifications
Full HD: Yes (to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (1 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: Via HDMI only
Digital tuner: Yes, Freeview HD

Tested: Issue 180
For more info visit:
www.samsung.co.uk



LG
47in → 47LE8900
£2,100 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

Full LED-backlit LCD with LG's NetCast feature and THX cred

Highs: Smart fascia and interface; good colours and contrast; great calibration tools
Lows: Limited web content

→ Specifications
Full HD: Yes (to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 1 (RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: 1
Digital tuner: Yes , Freeview HD

Tested: Issue 184
For more info visit:
www.lge.com/uk



SHARP
46in → LC-46LE821E
£2,000 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

Quad Pixel edge-lit LED TV with innovative in-built Flash PVR

Highs: Amazing levels of fine detail; great colour fidelity; useful Time Shift function
Lows: No video streaming

→ Specifications
Full HD: Yes (to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 1 (RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: 1
Digital tuner: Yes, Freeview HD

Tested: Issue 182
For more info visit:
www.sharp.co.uk

Also recommended...



LG
55in → 55LX9900
£3,700 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

LG's Active Shutter premium 3D screen benefits from its size

Highs: 2D and 3D pics have cinematic scale and punch; good calibration tools
Lows: Crosstalk; weak audio

→ Specifications
Full HD: Yes (to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 1 (RGB)
No. of component inputs: 2
PC input: 1
Digital tuner: Freeview HD

Tested: Issue 185
For more info visit:
www.lge.com/uk



SAMSUNG
46in → LE46C750
£1,500 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

3D for all. Affordable active shutter set with CCFL backlight

Highs: Good 2D performance and effective 2D-3D conversion
Lows: Crosstalk problems and narrow viewing angle

→ Specifications
Full HD: Yes (to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (1 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: 1
Digital tuner: Freeview HD

Tested: Issue 187
For more info visit:
www.samsung.co.uk



SONY
32in → NX503
£650 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

32in net TV set perfect for second-room use

Highs: Online talents; neat design; excellent contrast and HD detailing
Lows: Traces of motion blur

→ Specifications
Full HD: Yes (to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (2 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: 1
Digital tuner: Freeview HD

Tested: Issue 188
For more info visit:
www.sony.co.uk

Editor's Choice...

SAMSUNG
55in → UE55C9000
£7,000 Approx



1 2 3 4 **5**

The 55in Series 9 stands as the crowning glory of Samsung's TV design and technology divisions. It's an extraordinary product, which warrants its lofty position in the range, and is a great example of just how accomplished an LCD can be – none of Samsung's rivals have a comparable 'statement' product. As a feature-packed set that offers such goodies as 3D, 2D-3D conversion, Internet@TV and media streaming, it represents the leading edge in functionality and the picture quality is exquisite. Once you've seen one in action, you'll want one.

Tested: Issue 185
For more info visit: www.samsung.co.uk

→ Specifications
Full HD: Yes (to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 1 (RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: 1
Digital tuner: Yes, Freeview HD

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Plasma TV

Best on test...



PIONEER
60in → KRP-600A
£5,000 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**

Kuro with separate media box, Ethernet and satellite tuner

Highs: Awesome black levels; colour accuracy; slim panel; media-savvy
Lows: Problems with AVI files

→ Specifications
Full HD: Yes (up to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 3 (2 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: Yes
Digital tuner: Yes and DVB-S2 tuner

Tested: Issue 164
For more info visit:
www.pioneer.co.uk



PANASONIC
65in → TX-P65VT20
£4,500 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

The biggest 3D TV currently available is worth the high ticket

Highs: High-impact bigscreen pictures; minimal crosstalk with 3D images
Lows: Sucks electricity

→ Specifications
Full HD: Yes (up to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: Yes
Digital tuner: Yes, Freeview HD and Freesat HD

Tested: Issue 186
For more info visit:
www.panasonic.co.uk



PANASONIC
46in → TX-P46Z1
£4,300 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**

THX-certified, ultra thin PDP with wireless transmission

Highs: Stunning HD and SD pictures; gorgeous design; good features set
Lows: Premium price point

→ Specifications
Full HD: Yes (up to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: Yes
Digital tuner: Yes and Freesat HD

Tested: Issue 172
For more info visit:
www.panasonic.co.uk



PANASONIC
50in → TX-P50G20
£1,500 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**

Freeview HD and Freesat HD plasma is the FTA king

Highs: Performance; price; Freesat/Freeview HD tuners;
Lows: USB recording mode comes with strings attached

→ Specifications
Full HD: Yes (up to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: Yes
Digital tuner: Yes, Freeview HD and Freesat HD

Tested: Issue 182
For more info visit:
www.pioneer.co.uk



LG
32in → 32PG6000
£500 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

World's smallest 32in plasma challenges LCD rivals

Highs: Smooth movement; good blacks and connectivity
Lows: Lack of detail; some jagged edges; average audio

→ Specifications
Full HD: No
1024 x 720 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (1 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: Yes
Digital tuner: Yes

Tested: Issue 162
For more info visit:
www.lge.com/uk

Also recommended...



LG
50in → 50PG6000
£1,100 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

Superb HD Ready plasma offering great value for money

Highs: Extensive calibration possibilities; excellent black level; sexy bezel
Lows: Not full HD

→ Specifications
Full HD: No
1366 x 768 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 4
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (1 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: 1
Digital tuner: Yes

Tested: Issue 154
For more info visit:
www.lge.com/uk



PANASONIC
42in → TX-P42G15
£850 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

Freesat HD NeoPDP at an enticing price

Highs: Wide viewing angle; excellent HD pics
Lows: Lacks brightness; three HDMIs only

→ Specifications
Full HD: Yes
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 3
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (2 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: Yes
Digital tuner: Yes and Freesat HD

Tested: Issue 180
For more info visit:
www.panasonic.co.uk



SAMSUNG
50in → PS50A556
£1,000 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

Bargain-priced monster screen with a few caveats

Highs: Superb specification; great build quality; sharp detail
Lows: Some motion artefacts and noise visible

→ Specifications
Full HD: Yes (up to 1080p)
1920 x 1080 resolution
No. of HDMI inputs: 3
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (1 RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: Yes
Digital tuner: Yes

Tested: Issue 161
For more info visit:
www.samsung.co.uk

Editor's Choice...

PANASONIC
50in → TX-P50VT20
£2,000 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**



The arrival of Panasonic's first 3DTV was always going to get the AV juices running, and this 50in plasma doesn't disappoint. 3D Blu-ray material comes over sharp, smooth and crosstalk-free, while Sky's half-resolution 3D preview channel is revelatory, with sports coverage in particular showing excellent depth and detail. Other highlights of this surprisingly affordable 3D set include the two pairs of supplied eyewear, class-leading 2D hi-def picture performance, and savvy networking skills.

Tested: Issue 183
For more info visit: www.panasonic.co.uk

→ Specifications
Full HD: yes (up to 1080p)
Native resolution: 1,920 x 1,080
No. of HDMI inputs: 4 (v1.4)
No. of Scart inputs: 2 (RGB)
No. of component inputs: 1
PC input: Yes
Digital tuner: Freeview HD and Freesat HD

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Blu-ray players

Best on test...



DENON
Blu-ray → DVD-A1UD
£4,500 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**

Reference universal Blu-ray player that sets new standards

Highs: Stunning lifelike picture; genuine hi-fi sound; awesome DVD upscaling
Lows: Complex to set up; not for those on a budget!

→ Specifications
Blu-ray profile: 2.0
DVD upscaling: Up to 1080p
Multichannel phono out: Yes (7.1)
Onboard Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA decoding: Yes/Yes
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA bitstream output: Yes/Yes
DVD-A/SACD playback: Yes/Yes
Networkability: Ethernet

Tested: Issue 178
For more info visit:
www.denon.co.uk



SAMSUNG
Blu-ray → BD-C6900
£350 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

Early adopters will love this 3D Blu-ray player

Highs: 3D compatibility; video quality; USB file support
Lows: v1.4 HDMI output means hookup to older AVRs will be via 7.1 outputs

→ Specifications
Blu-ray profile: 2.0
DVD upscaling: Up to 1080p
Multichannel phono out: Yes (7.1)
Onboard Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA decoding: Yes/Yes
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA bitstream output: Yes/Yes
DVD-A/SACD playback: No/No
Networkability: Ethernet; wi-fi; USB

Tested: Issue 181
For more info visit:
www.samsung.co.uk



SONY
Blu-ray → BDP-S570
£230 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

3D Blu-ray spinner is packed with features

Highs: SACD playback; BBC iPlayer onboard
Lows: No multichannel phono outputs means you'll need a v1.4 AVR for 3D lossless audio

→ Specifications
Blu-ray profile: 2.0
DVD upscaling: Up to 1080p
Multichannel phono out: No (stereo only)
Onboard Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA decoding: Yes/Yes
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA bitstream output: Yes/Yes
DVD-A/SACD playback: Yes/No
Networkability: Ethernet; wi-fi, USB, iPlayer, LOVEFiLM

Tested: Issue 185
For more info visit:
www.sony.co.uk



LG
Blu-ray → BD570
£200 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

LG's new deck is an ideal media player-come-BD deck

Highs: Media streaming and networking; disc loading speed; integrated wi-fi
Lows: No internal memory for BD-Live; UI has inconsistencies

→ Specifications
Blu-ray profile: 2.0
DVD upscaling: Up to 1080p
Multichannel phono out: No (stereo only))
Onboard Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA decoding: Yes/Yes
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA bitstream output: Yes/Yes
DVD-A/SACD playback: No/No
Networkability: Ethernet; wi-fi; USB

Tested: Issue 186
For more info visit:
www.lge.com/uk



PANASONIC
Blu-ray → DMP-BDT300
£400 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

3D BD deck to work in tandem with the brand's 3D plasmas

Highs: Solid AV performance; 3D material is sharp, smooth and involving; twin HDMI outputs
Lows: wi-fi is by dongle only

→ Specifications
Blu-ray profile: 2.0
DVD upscaling: Up to 1080p
Multichannel phono out: Yes (7.1)
Onboard Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA decoding: Yes/Yes
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA bitstream output: Yes/Yes
DVD-A/SACD playback: No/No
Networkability: Ethernet; optional wi-fi dongle; USB; SD slot

Tested: Issue 183
For more info visit:
www.panasonic.co.uk

Editor's Choice...

SONY
Blu-ray → BDP-S370 → £150 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**



The first of Sony's 2010 Blu-ray players to come through the *HCC* Tech Labs has left us dying to see the higher-end models. This entry-level £150 machine is an absolute AV bargain, blowing its sub-£200 rivals out of the water thanks to its superb XMB control interface, BBC iPlayer and LOVEFiLM online access, Super Audio CD playback and, of course, quality HD video and audio performance. More proof that the Big S's Blu-ray focus is more than just the PS3.

Tested: Issue 184
For more info visit: www.sony.co.uk

→ Specifications
Blu-ray profile: 2.0
DVD upscaling: Up to 1080p
Multichannel phono out: No (stereo only)
Onboard Dolby TrueHD/DTS HD-MA decoding: Yes/Yes
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA bitstream output: Yes/Yes
DVD-A/SACD playback: No/Yes
Networkability: Ethernet; Wi-Fi; 2 x USB; Bravia Internet Video BBC iPlayer, LOVEFiLM, YouTube, etc

Also recommended



PIONEER
Blu-ray → BDP-LX52
£500 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

Stripped-down LX-branded player is a mid-range marvel

Highs: Class-leading picture and sound
Lows: Not simple to get to grips with; multichannel PQLS function only works on LPCM

→ Specifications
Blu-ray profile: 2.0
DVD upscaling: Up to 1080p
Multichannel phono out: No (stereo only)
Onboard Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA decoding: Yes/Yes
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA bitstream output: Yes/Yes
DVD-A/SACD playback: No/No
Networkability: Ethernet for BD-Live; USB

Tested: Issue 176
For more info visit:
www.pioneer.co.uk



PANASONIC
Blu-ray → DMP-BD85
£300 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**

New top-of-the line deck – until the 3D player arrives...

Highs: Overall picture and sound performance; 'Tube' sound emulator for CDs
Lows: Somewhat sluggish menus; wi-fi via dongle only

→ Specifications
Blu-ray profile: 2.0
DVD upscaling: Up to 1080p
Multichannel phono out: Yes (7.1)
Onboard Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA decoding: Yes/Yes
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA bitstream output: Yes/Yes
DVD-A/SACD playback: No/No
Networkability: Ethernet; wi-fi via dongle; SD card slot; 2 x USB

Tested: Issue 180
For more info visit:
www.panasonic.co.uk



CAMBRIDGE AUDIO
Blu-ray → Azur 650BD
£400 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

First deck from UK brand is a solid performer – and multiregion DVD, too

Highs: Bulletproof build; excellent AV performance
Lows: No 'net features

→ Specifications
Blu-ray profile: 2.0
DVD upscaling: Up to 1080p
Multichannel phono out: Yes (7.1)
Onboard Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA decoding: Yes/Yes
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD MA bitstream output: Yes/Yes
DVD-A/SACD playback: Yes/Yes
Networkability: Ethernet for BD-Live; 2 x USB

Tested: Issue 184
For more info visit:
www.cambridgeaudio.com

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Recorders

Best on test...



PHILIPS
Freeview HD PVR → HDT 8520
£250 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

Sets a high standard for user-friendliness

Highs: Good quality HD and SD pics; cutting-edge looks
Lows: No multimedia functions; EPG can be frustrating

→ Specifications
HDD size: 500GB
Twin tuners: Yes, Freeview HD
HDMI: Yes, with 1080p upscaling
Component output: No

Tested: Issue 185
For more info visit: www.philips.co.uk



HUMAX
Freeview HD PVR → HDR-FOX T2
£330 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**

The pick of the new Freeview HD PVRs so far

Highs: Joy to use; multimedia talent; great performance
Lows: Cramped remote control; can't trim recordings

→ Specifications
HDD size: 500GB
Twin tuners: Yes, Freeview HD
HDMI: Yes, with 1080p upscaling
Component output: No

Tested: Issue 187
For more info visit: www.humaxdigital.com/uk



TECHNISAT
Freeview HD PVR → HDFV
£150 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

Affordable Freeview HD PVR with external USB recording

Highs: Quality HD and upscaled SD performance; friendly user interface
Lows: USB files can't be played back elsewhere; single tuner

→ Specifications
HDD size: N/A – records to USB
Twin tuners: No, single Freeview HD tuner
HDMI: Yes, with 1080p upscaling
Component output: No

Tested: Issue 188
For more info visit: www.technisat.co.uk



DIGITALSTREAM
Freeview HD PVR → DHR8203U
£300 Approx

1 2 **3** 4 5

Versatile Freeview HD PVR from little-known Korean brand

Highs: Build quality; user interface; CI slot; plays JPEGs and MPEGs
Lows: Below-par SD pics

→ Specifications
HDD size: 500GB
Twin tuners: Yes, Freeview HD
HDMI: Yes, with 1080p upscaling
Component output: No

Tested: Issue 185
For more info visit: www.dstreamtech.com



GRUNDIG
Freesat PVR → GUFSDTR500HD
£280 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

Dual-tuner Freesat+ PVR with capacious 500GB HDD

Highs: Easy to use; cool-running; efficient upscaling of non-HD channels
Lows: USB port is disabled

→ Specifications
HDD size: 500GB
Twin tuners: Yes, Freesat HD
HDMI: Yes
Component output: No

Tested: Issue 182
For more info visit: www.grundig.co.uk

Also recommended



SAGEM
PVR → DTR67500T
£180 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**

500GB Freeview+ PVR with USB archiving

Highs: Large HDD; flexible and intuitive EPG; picture quality is excellent
Lows: No way of importing recordings from other devices

→ Specifications
HDD size: 500GB
Twin tuners: Yes, Freeview
HDMI: Yes
Component output: Yes

Tested: Issue 173
For more info visit: www.sagem.com/uk



PANASONIC
DVDR → DMR-EX773
£300 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

DVD/HDD recorder that misses out on Freeview HD

Highs: Solid AV performance; heaps of features and recording flexibility
Lows: No infra-red control over STB; single Freeview tuner only

→ Specifications
HDD size: 160GB
Twin tuners: No, single digital only
HDMI: Yes
Component output: Yes
Camcorder input: No – USB/SD via USB instead
Format: -R/RW, +R/RW, -RAM
Dual-layer recording: Yes

Tested: Issue 182
For more info visit: www.panasonic.co.uk



SAGEMCOM
Freeview HD PVR → RT190-320 T2 HD
£250 Approx

1 2 **3** 4 5

First Freeview HD PVR from the Sagem rebrand

Highs: Good quality HD and SD pics; picture window in EPG
Lows: Antediluvian UI; sluggish menu system; ugly LED display

→ Specifications
HDD size: 320GB
Twin tuners: Yes, Freeview HD
HDMI: Yes, with 1080p upscaling
Component output: No

Tested: Issue 185
For more info visit: www.sagemcomdigital.co.uk

Editor's Choice...

PANASONIC
DVD/BDR → DMR-BW880 → £800 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5



Panasonic has followed last year's award-winning twin Freesat HD/Blu-ray recorder with this Freeview HD model. Again sporting a 500GB HDD, Profile 2.0 Blu-ray player/recorder and Viera Cast online interactivity, this deck solidifies Panasonic's status as the kings of convergence. Blu-ray playback is first-rate, and as a PVR the BW880 is unique in its flexibility. Other goodies, including Gracenote compatibility, DLNA certification, DV, SD and USB inputs add to its appeal. Not cheap, but true quality often isn't.

Tested: Issue 186
For more info visit: www.panasonic.co.uk

→ Specifications
Hard disk: 500GB
Twin Tuners: Yes 2 x Freeview HD
Component output: No
Format: BD-RE, BD-R, DVD-R/RW, +R/RW, -RAM
Dual-layer recording: Yes

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AV receivers

Best on test...



NAD
Amp/Processor
M25/M15HD
£6,600 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**

Classy heavyweight combo

Highs: Innovative modular design; excellent performance
Lows: No XLR jacks

➜ Specifications
Power: 7 x 160W (8Ω)
Upscaling via HDMI: Yes
Tuner: Yes (AM/FM)
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD: Yes
Zone 2: Yes, and 3
Serial port control: Yes
THX certification: No
Component input: 3
HDMI: 4-in, 1-out (v1.3)
Multichannel input: Yes (7.1)

Tested: Issue 183
For more info visit:
nadelectronics.com



MARANTZ
AVR ➜ SR7005
£1,400 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**

Marantz finally shakes off its 2-channel bias with this stonking multichannel marvel

Highs: Effortlessly achieves superb detail; great value
Lows: Lacks 9-ch output; not THX rated; tricky to set LFE

➜ Specifications
Power: 7 x 125W (8Ω)
Upscaling via HDMI: Yes
Tuner: Yes (AM/FM/net)
Dolby TrueHD: Yes
DTS-HD: Yes
Zone 2: Yes
Serial port control: Yes
THX certification: No
Component input: 4
HDMI: 6-in, 2-out (v1.4a)
Multichannel input: Yes (7.1)

Tested: Issue 187
For more info visit:
www.marantz.co.uk



ONKYO
AVR ➜ TX-NR5007
£2,200 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**

A 9.2-channel HD receiver with exhaustive features and power

Highs: First-class home cinema performance; processing allows 9-channel height/width audio
Lows: No proprietary anti-jitter tech, wi-fi or secondary remote

➜ Specifications
Power: 9 x 220W (6Ω)
Upscaling via HDMI: Yes
Tuner: Yes (AM/FM/net)
Dolby TrueHD: Yes
DTS-HD: Yes
Zone 2: Yes, and 3
Serial port control: Yes
THX certification: Yes, Ultra2 Plus
Component input: 3
HDMI: 8-in, 2-out (v1.3)
Multichannel input: Yes (7.1)

Tested: Issue 180
For more info visit:
www.eu.onkyo.com



ONKYO
Amp/Processor
PR-SC5500/PA-MC5500
£3,600 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**

Onkyo's separates system delivers on all AV fronts

Highs: Massive power reserves; smooth AV performance
Lows: Sizable and weighty

➜ Specifications
Power: 9 x 220W (6Ω)
Upscaling via HDMI: Yes
Tuner: (Yes FM/AM/net)
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD: Yes
Zone 2: Yes, and 3
Serial port control: Yes
THX certification: Ultra2
Component input: 3
HDMI: 8-in, 2-out (v1.3)
Multichannel input: Yes (7.1)

Tested: Issue 182
For more info visit:
www.eu.onkyo.com



PIONEER
AVR ➜ SC-LX83
£2,000 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**

Pioneer's top-flight AVR mixes power, control and usabilty

Highs: Punchy, detailed, expansive sound; iControl app is superb; MCACC setup; RF remote handset
Lows: Seven-channel only

➜ Specifications
Power: 7 x 190W (8Ω)
Upscaling via HDMI: Yes
Tuner: Yes (AM/FM)
Dolby TrueHD: Yes
DTS-HD: Yes
Zone 2: Yes, and 3
Serial port control: Yes
THX certification: Yes, Ultra2 Plus
Component input: 3
HDMI: 6-in, 2-out
Multichannel input: Yes (7.1)

Tested: Issue 186
For more info visit:
www.pioneer.co.uk

Editor's Choice...

DENON
AVR ➜ AVR-4810
£2,800 Approx



1 2 3 4 **5**

Denon's AVR-4810 is the current king of the new breed of receivers that make all sorts of speaker configurations possible. Thanks to Audyssey DSX and Dolby Pro-Logic IIz processing, it's capable of driving an 11.3-channel system (with the aid of an extra stereo amp), and it'll have you re-arranging your speakers in no time. Beyond this mastery of new formats, the AVR-4810 delivers a rich, powerful sound and a full suite of features from Net radio and integrated wi-fi to a wide choice of inputs and four-zone multiroom. Brilliant.

Tested: Issue 179
For more info visit: www.denon.co.uk

➜ Specifications
Power: 9 x 140W (8Ω)
Upscaling to HDMI: Yes
Tuner: AM/FM/Net
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD: Yes/Yes
Zone 2: Yes and 3 & 4
Serial port control: Yes, 2
THX certification: No
Component input: 3
HDMI: 6-in, 2-out (v1.3)
Multichannel input: Yes (7.1)

Also recommended...



SONY
AVR ➜ STR-DH810
£300 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

Feature-packed HDMI v1.4 AVR at a bargain price

Highs: Value for money; Dolby Pro-Logic IIz; immersive and realistic soundstage
Lows: Not great at high volumes; limited in power

➜ Specifications
Power: 7 x 100W (8Ω)
Upscaling via HDMI: Yes
Tuner: Yes (AM/FM)
Dolby TrueHD: Yes
DTS-HD: Yes
Zone 2: No, unless you use S-Air wireless speakers
Serial port control: No
THX certification: No
Component input: 3
HDMI: 4-in, 1-out (v1.4)
Multichannel input: No

Tested: Issue 186
For more info visit:
www.sony.co.uk



ONKYO
AVR ➜ TX-SR608
£450 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**

The 3D-capable AVR delivers great value for money

Highs: Appealing price tag; big, fast, dynamic sound; solid video scaling
Lows: No networking or USB functionality; uninspiring build

➜ Specifications
Power: 7 x 160W (6Ω)
Upscaling via HDMI: Yes
Tuner: Yes (AM/FM)
Dolby TrueHD: Yes
DTS-HD: Yes
Zone 2: Yes
Serial port control: No
THX certification: Select2 Plus
Component input: 2
HDMI: 6-in, 1-out (v1.4a)
Multichannel input: No

Tested: Issue 184
For more info visit:
www.eu.onkyo.com



YAMAHA
AVR ➜ RX-V2065
£850 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

New-look Yamaha receiver is a great sub-£1K all-rounder

Highs: Superb networking prowess; wonderful natural sound that suits all material
Lows: GUI takes some getting used to

➜ Specifications
Power: 7 x 130W (8Ω)
Upscaling via HDMI: Yes
Tuner: Yes (AM/FM/net)
Dolby TrueHD: Yes
DTS-HD: Yes
Zone 2: Yes, and 3
Serial port control: Yes
THX certification: No
Component input: 2
HDMI: 5-in, 2-out (v1.3)
Multichannel input: Yes (7.1)

Tested: Issue 179
For more info visit:
www.yamaha.co.uk

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Projectors

Best on test...



INFOCUS
DLP → ScreenPlay SP8602
£3,000 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**

New-look DLP projector from a much-revered brand

Highs: Excellent picture quality; good range of adjustments; different 'skins'
Lows: Not as flexible to set up as some; slightly noisy runner

→ Specifications
1920 x 1080 resolution
HDMI inputs: 2
Component inputs: 3
D-Sub: Yes
Brightness (claimed): 1,300 ANSI Lumens
Contrast (claimed): 5,000:1
Lamp life (claimed): 2,500hrs
Fan noise: NA
24fps: Yes

Tested: Issue 182
For more info visit:
www.infocus.com



SIM2
DLP → MICO 40
£11,00 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**

SIM2's 'affordable' LED projector claims a 30,000-hour lamp life

Highs: Richly coloured, sharp pictures; nicely designed chassis; enormous setup flexibility
Lows: Bland remote and OS

→ Specifications
1920 x 1080 resolution
HDMI inputs: 2
Component inputs: 1
D-Sub: Yes
Brightness (claimed): 700 ANSI lumens
Contrast (claimed): 50,000:1
Lamp life (claimed): 30,000hrs
Fan noise: 25dB
24fps: Yes

Tested: Issue 189
For more info visit:
www.sim2.co.uk



RUNCO
DLP → LS-5
£7,500 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**

High-end CI projection for the mass market

Highs: Excellent contrast and colour response; superbly sharp images; minimal rainbow effect
Lows: Noisy runner

→ Specifications
1920 x 1080 resolution
HDMI inputs: 2
Component inputs: 2
D-Sub: Yes
Brightness (claimed): 800 ANSI lumens
Contrast (claimed): 15,000:1
Lamp life (claimed): 2,000 to 4,000hrs
Fan noise: 30dB
24fps: Yes

Tested: Issue 187
For more info visit:
www.pulsemarketing.org



EPSON
LCD → EH-TW5500
£4,000 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

Epson's flagship home cinema projector does LCD proud

Highs: Lots of features; easy and flexible to setup; produces the finest LCD pictures yet
Lows: More expensive than rivals; can lose focus a little

→ Specifications
1920 x 1080 resolution
HDMI inputs: 2
Component inputs: 1
D-Sub: Yes
Brightness (claimed): 1,600 ANSI Lumens
Contrast (claimed) 200,000:1
Lamp life (claimed): 4,000hrs
Fan noise: 22dB
24fps: Yes

Tested: Issue 181
For more info visit:
www.epson.co.uk



PANASONIC
LCD → PT-AE4000
£2,500 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

Updated flagship PJ adds red-rich lamp and 12V trigger

Highs: Smooth filmic pictures; easy to setup and use; handy feature set
Lows: Boxy design; be careful with high frame-rate settings

→ Specifications
1920 x 1080 resolution
HDMI inputs: 2
Component inputs: 1
D-Sub: Yes
Brightness (claimed): 1,600 ANSI lumens
Contrast (claimed): 100,000:1
Lamp life (claimed): 2,000 hours
Fan noise: 22dB
24fps: Yes

Tested: Issue 177
For more info visit:
www.panasonic.co.uk

Also recommended...



BENQ
DLP → W1000
£1,000 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

A £1K full HD projector with good colour presets

Highs: Very sharp HD pictures; alluring tactile finish; plenty of fine-tuning options
Lows: Rainbow effect; noticeable fan noise

→ Specifications
1920 x 1080 resolution
HDMI inputs: 2
Component inputs: 1
D-Sub: Yes
Brightness (claimed): 2,000 ANSI lumens
Contrast (claimed): 3,000:1
Lamp life (claimed): 4,000hrs
Fan noise: 27dB
24fps: Yes

Tested: Issue 179
For more info visit:
benq.co.uk



VIVITEK
DLP → H1085
£1,000 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

A brilliant full HD projector at a mouth-watering price

Highs: Rich colours; excellent image tweaks; 12V trigger
Lows: Noisy runner in high brightness mode; some low-level noise in darker scenes

→ Specifications
1920 x 1080 resolution
HDMI inputs: 2
Component inputs: 1
D-Sub: Yes
Brightness (claimed): 2,000 ANSI lumens
Contrast (claimed): 5,000:1
Lamp life (claimed): 4,000hrs
Fan noise: 26dB
24fps: Yes

Tested: Issue 179
For more info visit:
www.vivitekcorp.com



VIVITEK
DLP → H9080FD
£10,000 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

The world's first 'lampless' LED projector

Highs: Excellent colour fidelity; great definition; long lifespan
Lows: Lacks brightness; early adopters pay for the innovative LED tech

→ Specifications
1920 x 1080 resolution
HDMI inputs: 2
Component inputs: 1
D-Sub: No, use HDMI instead for PC hookup
Brightness (claimed): 1,000 ANSI lumens
Contrast (claimed): 15,000:1
Lamp life (claimed): 4,000hrs
Fan noise: N/A
24fps: Yes

Tested: Issue 173
For more info visit:
www.vivitekcorp.com

Editor's Choice...

JVC
D-ILA → HD950
£6,000 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**



Put simply, JVC's video-chucker is capable of an awe-inspiring performance. Spin up a Blu-ray and you'll be rewarded with three-dimensional, natural-looking pictures that are packed with detail, shadow subtlety and vibrant colours. Setting up the HD950 is made easy by its fully-motorised optical adjustments, and a THX-certified colour preset for those not wanting to get their hands dirty in its extensive calibration menus. It's an almost silent runner, too. The best PJ we've yet seen at this price point – and the recent HD990 upgrade improves on it even more!

Tested: Issue 179
For more info visit: www.jvc.co.uk

→ Specifications
1920 x 1080 resolution
HDMI inputs: 2
Component inputs: 1
D-Sub: Yes
Brightness (claimed): 900 ANSI lumens
Contrast (claimed): 50,000:1
Lamp life (claimed): 3,000hrs
Fan noise: 19dB
24fps: Yes

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Speaker systems

Best on test...



MONITOR AUDIO
5.1 → Platinum PL200AV
£11,500 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**

Gorgeous-looking, hi-tech 5.1 system for serious cinema

Highs: Dynamic, engaging sound with pin-sharp detail; taut, powerful bass; excellent build
Lows: Base plinths seem to belong to another design

→ Specifications
Power handling: 2 x 250W, 2 x 120W, 1 x 100W
Rears: Direct radiating
Subwoofer: 1 x 1,000W
Finish: Gloss; Bookshelf: No

Tested: Issue 184
For more info visit:
www.monitoraudio.com



CRYSTAL ACOUSTICS
5.1 → TX-T2-12
£1,300 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

Great value THX Ultra2-certified array with a classy finish

Highs: Impressive full-range scale and power from relatively small speakers
Lows: Brash and unsubtle; not so good at low volumes

→ Specifications
Power handling: 2 x 150W, 3 x 100W
Rears: Dipoles
Subwoofer: 200W
Finish: Gloss Bookshelf: No

Tested: Issue 185
For more info visit:
www.crystalaudiovideo.com



ACOUSTIC ENERGY
5.1 → AEGIS Neo V2
£1,000 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

Superior £1K system is excellent value for money

Highs: Classy build; dynamic, detailed and exciting audio performance; quality subwoofer
Lows: Sub controls may be daunting for beginners

→ Specifications
Power handling: 5 x 120W
Rears: Direct radiating
Subwoofer: 200W
Finish: Wood; Bookshelf: No

Tested: Issue 184
For more info visit:
www.acoustic-energy.co.uk



PSB
5.1 → Imagine Series
£3,000 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**

US-made speakers that are well-built and sound great

Highs: Disproportionate bass from tiny sub; fast, impactful highs; dynamic sound; high-quality finish
Lows: Subwoofer finish doesn't match the rest of the system

→ Specifications
Power handling: 2 x 200W, 3 x 150W
Rears: Direct radiating
Subwoofer: 500W
Finish: Wood; Bookshelf: No

Tested: Issue 188
For more info visit:
www.armourhome.co.uk



KLIPSCH
5.1 → Klipsch Synergy B20/SW-4502
£1,000 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

Affordable 5.1 array makes use of Klipsch's horn knowhow

Highs: Sensitive and loud speakers; warm and full sound; excellent HF dispersion
Lows: Booming bass needs taming; kinda ugly

→ Specifications
Power handling: 2 x 85W, 3 x 50W
Rears: Direct radiating
Subwoofer: 450W
Finish: Gloss; Bookshelf: Yes

Tested: Issue 189
For more info visit:
www.klipsch.co.uk

Also recommended...



CANTON
5.1 → Movie CD 151
£800 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

Impressive small-scale system from the German brand

Highs: Compact satellites; crisp and bold sound; punchy subwoofer
Lows: Less cohesive soundstage at the rear; not suitable for large rooms

→ Specifications
Power handling: 5 x 120W,
Rears: Direct radiating
Subwoofer: 120W
Finish: Gloss; Bookshelf: Yes

Tested: Issue 189
For more info visit:
www.canton.de/en



MONITOR AUDIO
5.1 → Silver RX6 AV12s
£2,200 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

Gorgeous-looking, hi-tech 5.1 system for serious cinema

Highs: Dynamic, engaging sound with pin-sharp detail; taut, powerful bass; excellent build
Lows: Base plinths seem to belong to another design

→ Specifications
Power handling: 3 x 125, 1 x 80W; Rears: Dipolar
Subwoofer: 1 x 500W
Finish: Gloss;
Bookshelf: No

Tested: Issue 184
For more info visit:
www.monitoraudio.com



Q ACOUSTICS
5.1 → 2000 Series
£550 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

Excellent 5.1 sub/sat system with living-room friendly looks

Highs: Detailed, compact satellites; alternative finishes/ supports; tweakable sub
Lows: Slightly rough sound when extended; lack of high-frequency subtlety

→ Specifications
Power handling: 4 x 75W, 1 x 100W; Rears: Direct radiating
Subwoofer: 140W
Finish: Gloss;
Bookshelf: Yes

Tested: Issue 185
For more info visit:
www.qacoustics.co.uk

Editor's Choice...

KEF
5.1 → XQ Series
£5,000 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**



This KEF 5.1 array mixes standmount surrounds with two hulking floorstanders to deliver a massive cinematic audio experience that's hard to fault – an ideal blend of deep bass, spacious mid-band and crystal clear treble. The design is gorgeous, too – another KEF masterclass in gloss black cabinets (curved to reduce internal reflections) and clearly taking a lead from the brand's awe-inspiring Reference system. Other variants of the speakers are available, so you can spec a more affordable, smaller room setup should you wish.

Tested: Issue 174
For more info visit: www.kef.com/gb

→ Specifications
Power handling: 2 x 200W, 2 x 120W, 1 x 150W
Rears: Direct radiating
Subwoofer: 1 x 200W
Finish: Gloss
Bookshelf: No chance

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Integrated CD player with CD-R/-RW support, MP3/WMA playback capability and DLNA 1.5

£349.99

★ ★ STAR BUY ★ ★ ★

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Marantz NR1601



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£349.99

★ ★ STAR BUY ★ ★ ★

YAMAHA RXV667



5 Star What Hi-Fi Award Winner AV Receiver with 2 Free HDMI Cables

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PARADIGM
SW → Seismic 110
£1,200 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**

Powerful, high-performance 10in sub with quirky styling

Highs: Excellent performance from a compact sub; monstrous power
Lows: Not a budget option

→ Specifications
Frequency response: 18Hz-150Hz (claimed)
Amplifier: 850W
Driver: 10in
Weight: 16.8kg
Enclosure: Sealed
On-board equaliser: No
Remote control: No

Tested: Issue 188
For more info visit:
www.paradigm.com



VELODYNE
SW → CHT-15Q
£1,200 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**

Potent 15in woofer with excellent EQ system

Highs: Tremendous grip, power, and headroom; supplied remote control
Lows: Pretty dull to look at

→ Specifications
Frequency response: 23Hz-120Hz (claimed)
Amplifier: 750W
Driver: 15in
Weight: 34kg
Enclosure: Ported
On-board equaliser: Yes
Remote control: Yes

Tested: Issue 189
For more info visit:
www.red-line.co.uk



PARADIGM
SW → Signature Sub 2
£7,250 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**

Reference grade sub for serious installs only

Highs: Astonishing power, control and speed; build quality is first rate
Lows Can you afford one?

→ Specifications
Frequency response: 7Hz-150Hz (claimed)
Amplifier: 4,500W
Driver: 6 x 10in
Weight: 105.7kg
Enclosure: Sealed
On-board equaliser: No
Remote control: No

Tested: Issue 183
For more info visit:
www.paradigm.com



XTZ
SW → 99 W12.18 ICE
£550 Approx

1 2 3 **4** 5

12in woofer from little-known Swedish brand

Highs: Delicious output; ICEpower amplification;
Lows: The EQ is a very blunt tool; online retailer only

→ Specifications
Frequency response: N/A (claimed)
Amplifier: 515W
Driver: 12in
Weight: 29kg
Enclosure: Ported
On-board equaliser: Yes
Remote control: No

Tested: Issue 188
For more info visit:
www.audiosanctum.co.uk



REL
SW → T3
£430 Approx

1 2 3 4 **5**

Great value-for-money small-scale subwoofer

Highs: Superb performance from such a small unit
Lows: Dual input system may irritate some

→ Specifications
Frequency response: 30-120Hz (claimed)
Amplifier: 150W
Driver: 8in
Weight: 12.5kg
Enclosure: Sealed
On-board equaliser: No
Remote control: No

Tested: Issue 186
For more info visit:
www.rel.net

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Photo: cinemadigital.be

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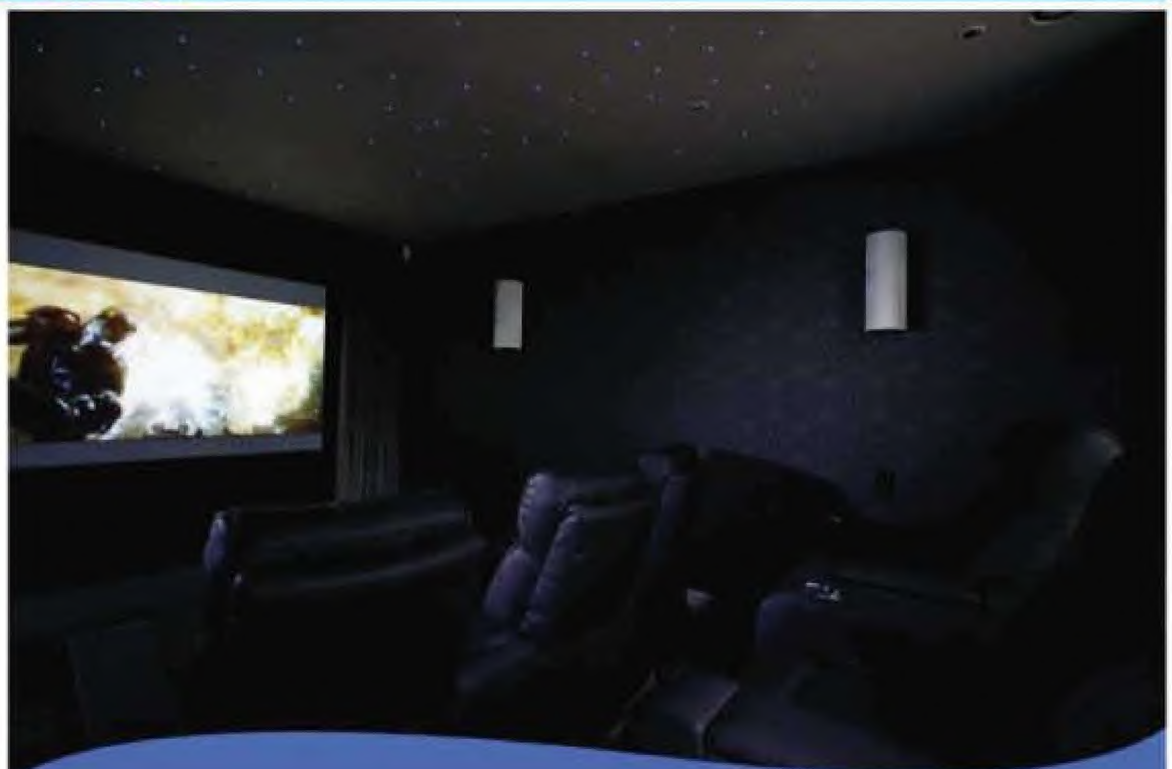
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